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David Gilmour Blythe's Street Urchins and American Nativism

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A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts at Virginia Commonwealth University.

by

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Abstract

DAVID GILMOUR BLYTHE'S STREET URCHINS AND AMERICAN NATIVISM

By Corey S. Piper, M.A.

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts at Virginia Commonwealth University.

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David Gilmour Blythe's street urchin paintings created during the 1850s are disturbing and often grotesque. The image of childhood that he created was quite different from that of his American contemporaries who adapted the romantic notion of the child from eighteenth-century English painters. Previous scholars have noted the contrast between Blythe's vision of America's street children and the optimistic view offered by other American painters but have not offered a sufficient explanation as to why they differed so radically. This thesis will examine several of Blythe's urchin scenes, as well as his poetry and writings to reveal the clear presence of anti-immigrant sentiment in his painting. Such an analysis will posit Blythe's political beliefs about immigration as a plausible explanation for his peculiar view of the children who occupied Pittsburgh's streets.

Introduction

During the middle decades of the nineteenth century, the population of America's cities began to swell. Fueled by immigration and industrialization, the demographics of the once largely rural republic shifted drastically. Burgeoning industrial centers were ill equipped to deal with the massive influxes of population and the volatility of the still developing industrial economy. Consequently, many newly arrived immigrants did not find prosperity but rather scarce employment, slums and crime. Such was the situation when David Gilmour Blythe settled in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, in 1856. Blythe had made a name for himself as a portrait painter in the surrounding areas, but upon his arrival in the city he established himself as a genre painter, beginning a period in his career during which he became preoccupied with painting the young street children who gathered throughout the city's back-alleys. Blythe completed more than 20 of these paintings over the course of at least five years.

Street urchins were a popular subject among the growing ranks of American genre painters in the mid-nineteenth century. At the beginning of the century, artists such as William Sidney Mount popularized genre scenes set in the frontier or countryside. By mid-century though, as genre painting became much more fashionable among the growing merchant and middle class, urban scenes became the norm. Blythe's contemporaries drew upon a well established tradition of painting beggar children, boot

blacks, match sellers and ragamuffins. Artists like Henry Inman and George Henry Hall used sentimental visions of poor children to express great optimism about America's future. Blythe's urchins are quite unlike those painted by his predecessors and contemporaries. The boy in *The Oatmeal Eater* does not inspire hope but rather pity and uncertainty (Figure 1). His blank stare and absence of mind cause worry for his future, as well as one's own. The menacing boys in scenes like *Street Urchins* inhabit dark spaces and are usually engaged in some form of criminal mischief (Figure 2). Rather than endearing rogues, Blythe's children are delinquents, idiots or broken spirits.

According to Blythe, the masses of immigrant children did not represent the promise of the city, but rather the potential for the American republic and society to unravel. All genre paintings contain political messages, and Blythe's urchins were meant to convey the message that the future of the American Republic was in perilous danger. This thesis will show that Blythe's cynical view of the children who inhabited Pittsburgh's streets was colored by strong nativism and a fear of the rising tide of immigration. Although he was the son of immigrants, throughout his life Blythe strongly opposed the growing flood of immigrants to the United States. He was a member of the nativist Know Nothing Party and wrote frequently of his distaste for foreigners. Blythe was not a xenophobe, rather he detested the way immigrants could be used and manipulated by corrupt parties within the capitalist system. He believed the franchise was too generously granted to those who did not understand its responsibilities. As voters and workers, immigrants could be taken advantage of by unscrupulous politicians and businessmen. To Blythe the presence of such a large

foreign-born population within the growing industrial society was a corrupting force that, left unchecked, could lead to the downfall of the Republic.

Blythe chose images of children to convey his political ideas because they were highly susceptible to the corrupting influences of the city, much like the immigrants whose ranks were steadily increasing. While other genre painters used children to express endless opportunity, Blythe chose children to convey the potential to be corrupted. This thesis will examine several of Blythe's urchin scenes, as well as his poetry and writings to reveal a clear presence of anti-immigrant sentiment in his painting. Such an analysis will reveal Blythe's political beliefs about immigration as a plausible explanation for his peculiar view of the children who occupied Pittsburgh's streets.

Blythe's urchin paintings have received scant attention from scholars. Dorothy Miller, in her study *The Life and Work of David G. Blythe*, calls them dull and mediocre, and offers little analysis.[1] In his monograph on the artist, Bruce Chambers discusses the paintings more thoroughly.[2] While he offers great insight into Blythe's political philosophies, he does not adequately connect these with the artist's early urchin paintings. Several of Blythe's paintings appeared alongside other images of urchins and ragamuffins by nineteenth-century American artists in the 2006 exhibit

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[1] Dorothy Miller, *The Life and Work of David G. Blythe* (University of Pittsburgh Press, 1950), 62.
[2] Bruce Chambers, *The World of David Gilmour Blythe (1815-1865)* (Washington D.C: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1980).

American ABC.[3] In her text accompanying the exhibit, Claire Perry devotes considerable attention to Blythe's work, and she acknowledges the darker version of childhood they present in comparison with the exhibition's other paintings.[4] She stops short of offering an explanation for this marked difference. To this point scholars have hinted at various reasons for Blythe's pessimistic view of Pittsburgh's street children ranging from his Presbyterian upbringing to bitterness over the death of his wife and his poor financial situation. None, though, have made the connection between Blythe's strident views on immigration and the way he pictured the largely immigrant population of street urchins.

David Gilmour Blythe was born in 1815 near East Liverpool, Ohio, the fourth son of a recently immigrated Scottish father and Irish mother. After arriving in New York City, Blythe's parents, John and Susan, moved steadily westward towards the Ohio valley, briefly taking up residence in Caledonia, New York, and finally settling near East Liverpool, Ohio. While few records remain from Blythe's childhood, Bruce Chambers, in his biography of the artist, offers a solid description of the conditions of Blythe's upbringing. Blythe's father followed the strict interpretation of Calvinism adhered to by the Seceder Presbyterians. Many Seceders left Scotland and Northern Ireland to avoid the influence of the Anglican Church on their faith. It is uncertain whether the Blythe family left their homeland as a direct result of persecution. It is

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[3] The multi-venue exhibition was held at The Iris & B Gerald Cantor Center for Visual Arts, Stanford University; The Smithsonian American Art Museum, Washington D.C. ; and the Portland Museum of Art, Portland, Maine.

[4] Claire Perry, *Young America: Childhood in 19th-Century Art and Culture* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2006), 111-145.

likely, though, that the family's particular beliefs were very important to them, as John Blythe was the son of Seceders, and their eventual destination, St. Clair, Ohio, was populated largely by Seceder Presbyterians. In addition to his strict religious upbringing, Blythe's parents also instilled in him a great respect for education and the political values embodied in the United States Constitution. Blythe's parents were both educated and his earliest letters and poems show a thorough knowledge of the Bible as well as the great British poets. These values, instilled in Blythe at a young age, had a powerful influence on the development of his career.

Like many artists Blythe is reported to have shown an early artistic aptitude, and at the age of sixteen he was sent to apprentice in the shop of Joseph Woodwell, a decorative woodcarver in Pittsburgh. He completed his apprenticeship by 1834 and worked for several years as a carver and house painter in Pittsburgh. His artistic career was interrupted by three years of service aboard the U.S.S. *Ontario*, a navy gunship, where he served as the ship's carpenter. By 1841 he had returned to Ohio, where he executed his first known paintings, a series of portraits carried out between 1841 and 1846. In 1841 Blythe painted the portrait of his father, John Blythe (Figure 3). While the handling of the paint is stiff, the artist renders his subject in a dignified manner. His early portraits show a lack of technical mastery, but Blythe was able to attract numerous commissions (as he may have been the only portrait artist working in this area at the time). By 1845 Blythe had obtained commissions as far away as Youngstown, Pennsylvania, and in 1847 he moved to Uniontown, Pennsylvania, to set up a portrait studio, and to be closer to Julia Keffer, whom he was courting.

In Uniontown Blythe continued to thrive as a portrait artist, painting many of the town's most influential politicians and merchants, including his lifelong friend Peter Uriah Hook. Blythe quickly built a reputation as an artist of note, and in the winter of 1847-48 he was commissioned to sculpt a statue of General Lafayette to sit atop the Fayette County Courthouse in Uniontown (Figure 4). It was a very important commission, and by all accounts it was well received. Blythe's career was ascending when he suffered two personal tragedies. In 1849 his wife Julia, whom he had married only a year earlier, died of typhoid. His father, John Blythe, passed away in 1852.

Amidst his personal hardship, Blythe undertook an ambitious project to create *The Great Moving Panorama of the Allegheny Mountains*.[5] Panoramas were a popular form of entertainment in the period. They usually consisted of a long canvas unrolled and accompanied by narration. Successful ventures traveled from city to city, charging admission at each stop. Blythe, along with his financial partners, Peter Uriah Hook and James Thomas Gorley, hoped their display would be able to travel to Pittsburgh, New York and eventually London. The panorama contained scenes from throughout the Allegheny and Appalachian Mountains depicting many events from the region's colonial history. Blythe threw himself into the project completely, traveling to sketch the landscapes, painting the large sections of canvas, writing the narration and even arranging the travel and billing of the performances. Ultimately the venture proved to be a complete failure. While the panorama received favorable reviews in Pittsburgh, it did not compete well with the many other choices available to the public. The failure of his

[5] Blythe's panorama is unlocated today and was likely cut into fragments to be sold for wall decoration or theater scenery.

largest artistic enterprise to date, coupled with the deaths of his wife and father, left Blythe disillusioned. Between 1852 and 1854 there is no record of Blythe's work, or even his location and situation.

Blythe reemerged in 1854 in East Liverpool, Ohio, equipped with a new technical mastery and polish to his painting. It is unclear where Blythe lived during the preceding years, but he was certainly exposed to new sources of inspiration and new techniques of painting.[6] The most important development to emerge from this hiatus was a new preoccupation with genre painting. He continued to paint portraits, but also began painting scenes using stock characters. *The Shoremen* (Figure 5) is an example of Blythe's early use of stereotypes to cast figures as members of a particular group. The low-slung cap of the man on the right and the bushy moustache of the man on the left identify them unmistakably as Irish and German immigrants.

With his new interest in genre painting and confidence in his technique, Blythe began painting his street urchins. He executed more than twenty paintings of young, disheveled and delinquent boys between 1854 and 1860. Blythe moved to Pittsburgh in 1856, and the city's urban landscape serves as the backdrop for the squalid scenes. The urchin paintings varied in subject and composition. While *Street Urchins* (Figure 2) shows menacing youths engaged in criminal mischief, *A Match Seller* (Figure 6) portrays a boy worn ragged by life on the streets. The paintings all share a harshly

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[6] Chambers, *The World of David Gilmour Blythe*, 31-32, suggests that Blythe may have traveled to New York because of similarities between his new style and the work of artists like Asher B. Durand and David Wilkie, whose works were widely available in that city. He also likely spent some time in Cincinnati, the final stop of his Panorama and an important western art center situated along the Ohio River.

cynical view of the hordes of young boys who roamed the streets of Pittsburgh. Their grotesque appearance and disturbing behavior elicit little sympathy from the viewer. While these urchin paintings constitute only one part of Blythe's varied oeuvre, they stand out as some of his most arresting works. Between 1860 and his death in 1865, Blythe turned away from painting the young, urban poor. Instead he focused his efforts on satirizing the volatile political climate.

Images of ragged children were not a nineteenth-century innovation; rather Blythe's paintings drew on a long tradition of urchin and child painting. The seventeenth-century Spanish artist Bartolemé Esteban Murillo painted dozens of scenes of the young poor such as the Louvre's *Urchin Hunting Fleas* (1648). Murillo's work was well known throughout Europe through prints, and his popularity in Britain reached its peak around the turn of the nineteenth century.[7] The popularity of Dutch genre scenes in American collections also affected the development of American street urchin paintings. During the seventeenth century childhood started to become a much more closely studied part of life. This change in attitudes affected Dutch genre painting, leading to the appearance of many more children among the stock characters who appeared in adult genre scenes. Like many other American artists, David Gilmour Blythe was a student of Dutch genre painting and made at least one copy after a David Teniers painting in the collection of a Boston merchant, Charles Russell Codman.[8]

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[7] Xanthe Brooke, "Seville and Beyond: The Taste for Murillo's Genre Painting Across Europe," in *Murillo, Scenes of Childhood*, (Dulwich Picture Gallery, 2001), 67.

[8] H. Nicholas Clark, "A Taste for the Netherlands: The Impact of Seventeenth-Century Dutch and Flemish Genre Painting on American Art, 1800-1860," *American Art Journal*, 14, No. 2. (Spring, 1982), 28.

The most direct precedent for the scenes of ragged youth that appeared in nineteenth-century American genre scenes was the eighteenth century British "fancy picture." The subjects of these paintings were varied, but easily the most popular were scenes of ragged beggar children and urchins.[9] John Russell's *Love Songs and Matches*, (Figure 7) typifies the genre. In eighteenth-century Britain the term "fancy" meant fantasy, and characters like Russell's match seller were meant to reassure and entertain the bourgeois audience who purchased the paintings. Match sellers were on the very bottom rung of the social order in the city and barely eked out an existence. While Russell's boy is dressed in rags, they stand in stark contrast to his cheerful expression and rosy complexion.

The development of the fancy picture in Britain was highly influenced by the Romantic notion of childhood that emerged in the eighteenth-century. Prior to the enlightenment, childhood was not thought of as a distinct stage of life. In the Middle Ages and Renaissance children were simply treated as smaller versions of adults, who lacked experience and knowledge. Some Protestant beliefs, most notably those of Calvinists, cast children as the inheritors of original sin and therefore inherently flawed. Jean Jacque Rousseau's book *Emile*, first published in 1762, is widely thought to have spawned the romantic notion of the child. The five volume work was a treatise on how to correctly raise and educate well-adjusted young men.[10] While there are many

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[9] Martin Postle. *Angels and Urchins: The Fancy Picture in 18th Century British Art (*Nottingham: Djanogley Art Gallery, 1998), 7.

[10] Rousseau focused much of his attention on how to properly raise boys and tended to ignore female children in his writing. While he felt that boys should be allowed great freedom in their upbringing, he believed the principal occupation for young girls should be learning practical pursuits that would help

components to Rousseau's educational philosophy, his basic premise was that children were essentially good, but could be corrupted by society. According to Rousseau, a child was not just a smaller version of an adult, but something more natural and animal.[11] As such, a child should not be restricted but allowed to fully express his creativity and childish impulses. Rousseau advocated removing children from urban environments and educating them in nature, where they would be free from any chance of corruption. Once a child had fully formed in this environment, Rousseau believed they could be reintroduced to adult society, better equipped to prosper. In the midst of changing ideas about childhood, a cult of the child developed in Europe and America. During this period special clothes and games were developed for children, and communities began offering free public education on a much wider scale.

The transformation of childhood in the minds of eighteenth-century parents also changed the way children were depicted in art. Prior to the enlightenment children were often depicted in paintings as simply smaller versions of adults. Children, who mostly appeared in portraits, were depicted in terms of their future adult status. In the eighteenth century English academicians like Sir Joshua Reynolds, Thomas Gainsborough and Thomas Lawrence began portraying childhood as a distinct stage of life. Their main innovation was to completely separate the child from any adult context. In her study of the romantic child, *Pictures of Innocence: The History and Crisis of Ideal Childhood*, Anne Higonnet argues that these children were divorced from all the

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them to better serve men when they reached adulthood. See John Cleverly and D.C. Phillips, *Visions of Childhood: Influential Models from Locke to Spock*, (New York: Teacher's College Press, 1986).

[11] George Boas, *The Cult of Childhood* (London: The Warburg Institute, 1966), 31.

trappings of adult society such as class and gender.[12] Reynolds' *Age of Innocence*, (Figure 8) exemplifies this break between childhood and adult society.[13] The child's soft features, creamy skin and billowing skirt provide the viewer with sensual delight, while the child's vague gender prevents sexualizing the body. Shown in nature, the child's clothes do not identify her with any class or even family.

British Painters like John Russell still followed the model of the romantic child, even when painting the downtrodden and poor children of the city. While the boy in Russell's *Love Songs and Matches* is clearly poor, he is more closely associated with the romantic idea of childhood than a specific class. The boy's clothes are tattered but he is still clean. He remains cheerful and unthreatening. Such romantic images of poor children provided reassurance in a period when class tensions were constantly escalating, and they also helped to distract viewers from some of the unpleasant aspects of adult society.

Blythe's urchins stand in stark contrast to the reassuring images offered by Reynolds, Russell and other proponents of the romantic notion of childhood. They are frightening rather than entertaining. While Russell's match seller belongs vaguely to the lower class, Blythe's urchins are specifically identified with a distinct segment of Pittsburgh society which many held to be dangerous. Blythe departed from the long tradition of beggar and urchin paintings because he was not trying to portray a fanciful

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[12] Anne Higonnet, *Pictures of Innocence: The History and Crisis of Ideal Childhood* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1998), 24.

[13] The identity of the model for this painting is uncertain. It was originally presented as a fancy picture and was likely first exhibited with the title *A Little Girl*. See David Mannings and Martin Postle, *Sir Joshua Reynolds, A Complete Catalogue of His Paintings*, Vol. 1 (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2000), 507.

or imaginary scene but to convey the threat he felt the immigrant underclass posed to American society and democracy.

The first chapter of this thesis will examine paintings by two of Blythe's American contemporaries who adopted the romantic view of the child and used it to convey ideas about the spirit of American enterprise and the strength of American character. The following chapter will closely analyze several of Blythe's urchin scenes to show how he created his opposing representation of childhood. This chapter will explore the iconography of Blythe's painting and the broader context of immigration in American cities. Finally the thesis will show how Blythe's beliefs about immigration and the political process helped form his concept of Pittsburgh's young street children. The final chapter will discuss nativist politics and show how Blythe's political views were an integral part of his art.

Chapter 1: The American Urchin

Following the example of the English fancy picture, American genre painters used poor children and street urchins to express an ideal of the romantic innocence of youth. While this ideal was the main focus of the fancy picture, American painters in the first half of the nineteenth century also used the image of the innocent child to represent the state of the young nation. This chapter will focus on two paintings, one by Henry Inman and the other by George Henry Hall, to show how each artist used the notion of romantic childhood to express optimism about America's future. In Inman's painting *The Newsboy* (Figure 9) the artist depicts a ragged boy beginning a new day on the streets. The uplifting painting suggests that the same system that leaves some citizens on the street dressed in rags also allows those with an enterprising spirit to rise above their condition. Hall creates a different kind of scene in *Boys Pilfering Molasses* (Figure 10), in which three young boys engage in a minor act of criminal mischief. In this painting Hall equates the precociousness of youth with the pioneering and resourceful spirit of America. Both painters adapted the well-established motif of the urchin painting to express their confidence in the future of the nation.

Genre scenes of poor street children became popular in the United States around the same time as sentimental images of barefoot, country children. Paintings such as Eastman Johnson's *The Barefoot Boy* (Figure 11) created an ideal of rural boyhood meant

to stir nostalgia in urban viewers.[1] By the middle of the nineteenth century though, it was clear that America's future lay in the city rather than the countryside. While nostalgic images of idyllic country children recalled the past, scenes of urban children spoke to the present and future of the nation. New York artist Henry Inman painted genre scenes of children set in both the country side and city. While his country scenes use sentiment to stir nostalgia, his 1841 painting *The Newsboy* presents a hopeful vision of the nation's future.

Inman's painting depicts a boy of about ten, standing on the sidewalk, ready to begin his day's work of peddling newspapers. Rather than dangerous or boorish, Inman's newsboy is dignified and confident. The round overall composition of the painting is reminiscent of English fancy pictures and Inman frequently used a round canvas for his commissioned portraits. While *The Newsboy* is clearly not a portrait, by repeating the oval shape of the canvas, Inman lends a degree of esteem to the subject that was not often present in genre paintings. The boy is placed directly in front of the viewer. This composition, along with the boy's bright expression and casual stance, engages the viewer and creates an immediate connection. Detached from the hordes of other street children, Inman's newsboy is a sympathetic and lovable character. Inman employs many means to put the viewer at ease with the young newsboy. While the boy's clothes are tattered and torn, he has still taken the effort to present himself well. He is dressed for

[1] See Sarah Burns, "Barefoot Boys and Other Country Children: Sentiment and Ideology in Nineteenth-Century American Art," *American Art Journal* 20, No. 1 (1988), 25-50; also, Claire Perry, *Young America*, 11-33.

business with a tie to match his bright collar and vest.[2] The orange and pink dawn sky bathes the scene in a soft light indicating the promise of a new day. The sphinx statue suggests permanence and civilization, while the apple shows that the young newsboy has the means to satisfy his own needs. The faintly chalked letters "OK" on the staircase reiterate the entire mood of the scene.[3]

New York merchant George D. Strong, a vocal critic of the city's newsboys, commissioned the painting in 1841.[4] For a reformer like Strong, Inman's painting served as a visual representation of the "right" kind of poor boy. Inman's newsboy cheerfully accepts his station but works hard to improve it. Most importantly he poses no danger to the city. New York's mayor estimated in 1840 that at least a thousand young vagrants roamed the streets, but Inman's painting suggested that under the right circumstances these children could be put to good use. When Strong entered the painting in the Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts exhibition in 1842, it elicited a strong reaction from the public. Seba Smith was inspired to write a short story, creating a fictional persona for the young newsboy, which he published in the 1843 edition of *The Gift*. Smith dubbed the newsboy Billy Snub, an immigrant's son who ran away from home when he discovered his father was taking his newspaper money to buy alcohol. Billy saved his

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[2] Elizabeth Johns, *American Genre Painting: The Politics of Everyday Life* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1991), 185.

[3] Ibid, 186. Johns argues that the letters "OK" also allude to the 1840 presidential campaign. In this election Martin Van Buren was cast as an aristocrat while William Henry Harrison claimed to be a man of the people. According to Johns, the "OK" graffiti was meant to show that the lower classes still had a check against the wealth and power of the rich.

[4] Ibid, 185.

money and even supported his mother and siblings when his father would not.[5] Smith's story was fictional, but the image hit closer to home for some, such as a critic working for the *New-York Mirror*, who called the painting spirited and "true to nature."[6] Clearly residents of the cities like New York wanted to believe in this type of street urchin. Inman's painting provided reassurance that good could come of the very things that caused fear and anxiety within the city.

Inman's painting not only made viewers more comfortable with the young boys who were filling city streets, but also eased apprehensions about the health of the American republic. When Inman exhibited *The Newsboy* in 1841, the devastating Panic of 1837 was still fresh in many people's minds. The panic was the result of banking collapses brought on by the rampant speculation which had fueled the rapid industrial growth of the previous decades. The economic changes during this period radically altered American society and the populace was not equipped to deal with the social ills that followed the depression. It is understandable that many would feel uneasy with the direction of the country when sweeping changes in the way people lived and worked were seemingly responsible for the problems facing the city. Inman's painting, though, creates a much more optimistic view of the situation. *The Newsboy* can be interpreted more broadly as a statement not only about the future of street children, but also the new, urban America.

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[5] Carrie Rebora, *The Art of Henry Inman* (Washington D.C: The National Portrait Gallery, Smithsonian Institution, 1987), 131.
[6] "National Academy of Design," *New-York Mirror* (May 22, 1841), 167, quoted in Rebora, *The Art of Henry Inman*, 131.

Inman employs several devices within *The Newsboy* to inspire pride and confidence in the American city. The newsboy is set up along Broadway, a busy thoroughfare where he is sure to easily sell all of his papers. The scattered debris in the foreground recalls the hustle and bustle of business rather than the grime frequently associated with the city. The boy is set up in front of the Astor House Hotel, one of New York City's most luxurious buildings. Built in 1836, it provided modern conveniences for its guests such as steam heating and plumbing in each room. The hotel was the pinnacle of American opulence and enterprise.

The main American icon in the painting is the newsboy himself, who was a uniquely American subject in the 1840s. European genre paintings sometimes cast children as news criers but the advent of penny papers in the United States during the 1830s led to the appearance of newsboys on street corners and in genre paintings. Prior to the 1830s newspapers were primarily sold through fixed subscriptions, but cheaper printing costs and growing urban markets led publishers to shift their focus from subscription revenue to advertising and sales.[7] The style of reporting also changed from highly partisan to objective and distanced. Newspapers began to see themselves as a voice for the increasingly literate and politically aware lower and middle classes. The penny papers marketed the free exchange of ideas, and their perceived objectivity was one of their greatest selling points.[8]

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[7] Bryan Wolf, "All the World's A Code: Art and Ideology in Nineteenth-Century American Painting," *Art Journal*, 44, No. 4 (Winter 1984), 330.
[8] Ibid., 331.

The first paper to employ newsboys was the *New York Sun* and the idea quickly spread. The paper's editor Benjamin Day proposed that the new penny paper business model would be best served by employing individual salesmen on the city streets to cry out headlines. Day chose poor boys to serve this function because they would work cheaply but also would seem less threatening to customers than older men.[9] Typically newsboys paid one and a half cents for each paper and sold them to customers for two cents. The newsboy bought all the papers upfront, which provided him incentive to sell his entire complement by whatever means necessary. The newsboy's rough reputation was mostly due to the aggressive tactics he was forced to employ to make a living. By the Mexican-American War of 1846-1848, the penny paper had entrenched itself as the main form of press in America. Benjamin Day's sales model became an integral part of the newspaper business and newsboys became an ever-present feature of American cities for decades to come. When Inman painted his newsboy, such figures were still a relatively new sight in America's cities. Those who feared the city's listless youths would have likely been calmed by the image of Inman's rose-cheeked, hardworking newsboy. Such a figure could have also allayed uncertainty about the direction of American business. Reckless speculation could cause economic disaster as in the Panic of 1837, but the spirit of enterprise was still alive and healthy within Inman's young newsboy.

While Inman's painting may have projected a comforting image of the city, in reality American cities were facing widespread poverty and had struggled for years to deal with the problem of poor and abandoned children. Scattered relief efforts had

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[9] Stephen O'Connor, *Orphan Trains: The Story of Charles Loring Brace and the Children He Saved and Failed (* Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 2001), 89.

persisted in American cities since the eighteenth century, but the Panic of 1837 convinced many citizens that a more proactive and systematic approach was needed to alleviate urban poverty. Early American poverty relief measures focused on recreating the values of the village within the city in the hope that traditional moral order would prevail over the evils of the city. As the nineteenth century progressed however the poor began to be seen as both victims and cause of moral corruption within the city.[10] The middle classes began to fear not only the potential for violence in the city, but also that the moral evils of drunkenness, gambling and prostitution could spread out of the slums. Equally as frightening was the thought that the city's poor would simply accept their fortune and embrace a life of moral depravity.

Many different moralists and reformers emerged in the years following the Panic of 1837, offering different solutions to the poverty that plagued children of the city. One approach, typified by the efforts of Robert Milham Hartley, advocated the confinement of orphans and children whose parents could not provide for them to asylums. In 1843 Hartley founded the New York Association for Improving the Condition of the Poor. Hartley believed that the problems among the city's poor were the result of individual moral shortcomings and that the solution was a moral reeducation. In his asylum Hartley imposed a harsh regimen of hard work and discipline. The asylum became a common feature in many American cities during the 1840's, following Hartley's example of using strict discipline to instill within the children the proper values they would need to resist the temptation for moral corruption as adults.

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[10] Paul Boyer, *Urban Masses and Moral Order in America, 1820-1920* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1978), 86.

While Hartley blamed the individual for the ills of the city, Charles Loring Brace believed that the city was a corrupting force that tempted children to stray from a moral path. Brace opposed the collective nature of the asylum system because he felt that poor children posed a much greater threat to society as an organized group.[11] He believed that the asylum repressed the street child's best qualities such as independence and cleverness. Brace helped found the Children's Aid Society in New York City in 1853 which promoted a well rounded education for the young poor. Brace believed that rather than performing mundane tasks under strict discipline, children would be better served learning viable trades. One of the most revolutionary aspects of the Children's Aid Society was the Newsboy's Lodging House, created in 1854. At the Lodging House, newsboys paid a nominal fee of six cents and received a bed for the night, a bath and clothing if needed.[12] There was little moralizing other than a few rules prohibiting drunkenness and rowdiness. Boys were free to stay for as long or as short a period as they wished. Brace's goal was to provide aid to the young poor, without making them dependent upon charity. Brace found many of the traits most condemned by reformers like Hartley to be the newsboys' strongest qualities. Brace writes of the newsboy's character:

> His morals are, of course, not of a high order, living, as he does, in a fighting, swearing, stealing, and gambling set. Yet he has his code; he pays his debts to other boys, and thinks it dishonorable to sell papers on their beat, and, if they come on his, he administers summary justice by "punching;" he is generous to a fault and will always divide his last sixpence with a poorer boy. "Life is a strife" with him, and money its reward; and, as bankruptcy means to the street-boy a night on the door-

[11] Ibid., 96.
[12] O'Connor, 92.

> steps without supper, he is sharp and reckless, if he can only earn enough to keep him above water.[13]

Above all, Brace admired the newsboys' independent spirit. He felt that if he could keep these children away from the temptations of the city, their own cunning and street-sense would deliver them from poverty and depravity.

In his painting *Boys Pilfering Molasses* (Figure 10) George Henry Hall approaches street urchins with an admiration similar to Brace's. The scene depicts a multi-ethnic group of three boys in tattered clothing, gathered around a large molasses barrel. The boys have broken the seal on the barrel and are gleefully sampling its contents. One boy is barefoot and while another's jacket is worn apart at the seams. Urchin scenes showing interaction between black and white children were rare, but in this painting all three boys seem equally engaged in the theft and equally appreciative of the rewards. One boy spreads the molasses on a piece of bread, while another uses a stick to retrieve the treat from the barrel. These boys clearly came prepared for their task, and they have assuredly engaged in such acts before. The group is concealed by the wall of a building but the scene appears mostly open and airy. The ships in the background, bearing the flags of the Empire Line, place the scene along a dock or wharf. The ship's sail reports its eventual destination of San Francisco, where perhaps it will deliver the molasses. The boys seem unconcerned with the business in the background, instead enjoying the momentary pleasure found in their stolen treat.

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[13] Charles Loring Brace, *The Dangerous Classes of New York and Twenty Years Work Among Them* (1872; reprint, Washington D.C: National Association of Social Workers, 1973), 98-99.

Despite the illicit nature of the boys' actions, the scene is cheery and light-hearted. While the boys may be hidden behind the wall of a building, the scene is brightly lit and the theft occurs out in the open. The pleasure and warm expressions on the boys' faces compensate for the criminality of their actions. The barrel is quite large and one imagines that there are many more ready to be loaded on the ships. The boys meanwhile are taking only enough for a small taste. Hall's sympathetic portrayal of the group could easily sway one to forgive the boys for their crime. While the boys may be stealing, they pose no threat to the city as a whole. Hall transforms their criminal act into a harmless episode of youthful mischief.

While one could read this painting as a simple endorsement of youthful mischief, it is also related to the American spirit of adventure and western expansion. In his painting Hall makes an overt connection between the young boys on eastern city streets, and the western United States through the ships harbored in the background. The American frontier had been progressing westward since the country's founding. The Empire Line was one of many shipping companies offering sea passage to the west by rounding the tip of South America. Westward migration was common throughout the nineteenth century, spurred by measures such as the Distribution-Preemption Act of 1841, which authorized congress to offer western land cheaply to immigrants in order to ease crowding in eastern cities. It was the gold rush of 1848, though, that most drastically shaped the eastern perception of the rough and ragged western frontiersman. Previous images of westerners depicted lower class figures who came from an inferior stock. In the 1840s and 1850s artists began to portray westerners as men who eschewed middle class

values in favor of the skills and traits necessary to survive. Kit Carson, the famous trapper and guide, modeled this image of the rough-edged westerner who still managed to embody honesty, generosity and forthrightness.[14] A visual example of this western type can be found in Charles Deas' *Long Jakes* (Figure 12). In the painting the leather clad trapper masterfully surveys his domain from the seat of his horse. His clothing and ragged beard lack refinement and style, but he clearly possesses the skill and prowess necessary to thrive in the west.

Images of unrefined frontiersman would have introduced viewers to the rough appearance of young city rogues in paintings like *Boys Pilfering Molasses*. More importantly these characters showed that the behavior that many bemoaned in the city could be put to good use in the west. Westward migration was commonly seen as a solution to the ills of the city, but increasingly it was viewed as an opportunity for which street children were uniquely suited. Charles Loring Brace was one reformer who extolled the benefits of sending orphaned and impoverished children westward. He argued that their greatest quality, "their sturdy independence," would serve them well in the west.[15] Almost from the outset of the Children's Aid Society, Brace sought to place city children with western families. Brace organized his first orphan train in 1854, sending dozens of boys and girls from New York to Dowagiac, Michigan. The children were chosen mostly from those already involved with the CAS, but in at least one case, a boy was taken without even verifying that he was an orphan.[16] Brace was convinced that

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[14] Johns, 69.
[15] Brace, 100.
[16] O'Connor, 107.

the west offered more opportunities and that the child would be much better off, regardless of his current situation in the city. Brace claimed that his orphan trains were extremely successful, and the practice continued in some form into the twentieth century.

Hall's painting shows that city dwellers were beginning to recognize something valuable in the poor boys who roamed the streets. The boys who caused mischief in the city shared many of the qualities of the pioneers who were taming the west. Similarly, in Inman's painting the savvy business sense of the newsboy was a necessary ingredient in American enterprise. In these scenes of street children, viewers could recognize many of the traits valued by the middle class. Although Inman and Hall both portray the poorest segment of American society, their paintings were highly optimistic that misfortune was only temporary. The artists skillfully employed the traditional image of the street urchin to express their confidence in America and its future.

Inman's and Hall's great optimism for America's future was shared by many, but not all. Some artists did acknowledge the rift between the reality of life on the streets and the sentimental portrayal of street children. George Henry Yewell's painting *The Bootblack (Doing Nothing)* (Figure 13) expresses a great uncertainty about the effectiveness of the reform efforts aimed at the poor of America's cities. The painting shows a young bootblack, leaning against his shine box and staring blankly out into the street. To his left is the Tombs, the New York City Halls of Justice and the city's penitentiary.[17] On the wall behind him to the right numerous posters and bills advertise a wide array of reform movements, remedies and distractions. One alludes to the "Maine

[17] Johns, 188.

Law," a statute which banned the sale of alcohol in that state, while another extols the benefits of tonic cures. Others urge support for the Christian ministry and the Sunday school movement. The boy is caught between the posters urging reform and a life of crime and prison. While the path leading to the Tombs is clear, the one leading to reform and a morally upstanding life in the city was not so certain.

Yewell's painting shows that despite the efforts of reformers and artists to assuage the problems of the city, no clear solution had arisen by the middle of the 1850s. While some artists remained confident in the future of the American society, others like Yewell and David Gilmour Blythe were unconvinced. The next chapter will examine Blythe's street urchin paintings to reveal an image of poor children that was completely opposed to those of his contemporaries like Inman and Hall. Blythe confirmed rather than confronted middle-class fears of the city, using street urchins to represent the peril that awaited the nation if it continued along its current path.

Chapter 2: The Urchin as Immigrant

David Gilmour Blythe created a dark and sinister view of the poor in the numerous genre scenes he painted of young street urchins. While other American painters viewed the city's young residents with hope and admiration, Blythe portrayed a broken underclass poised for destruction. In his portraits of wealthy patrons' children, Blythe was capable of creating an image of childhood every bit as sentimental as artists like Inman and Hall. His portrait *Young Girl with Pink Rose* (Figure 14), of an unknown sitter shows a modest young girl looking sweetly over her shoulder at the viewer. This sentimental style typified Blythe's portraits of children, and by contrast they make the children who inhabit his genre scenes seem all the more alarming and grotesque. This chapter will examine three of Blythe's paintings, *Street Urchins*, *A Match Seller* and *The Oatmeal Eater* to reveal a completely unsympathetic vision of street children. This chapter will also show how Blythe equated his street urchins with the rising levels of immigration. The boys in Blythe's urchin paintings were not classless and timeless like those in an English fancy picture but belonged to the ranks of immigrants who were swelling the city's slums. Unlike the children in Inman's and Hall's paintings, Blythe's urchins were completely unredeemable and spoke poorly for the nation's character. Blythe's dark portrayal of Pittsburgh's street children attests to his great unease with the state of the nation as a whole.

Blythe may have painted several urchin paintings before arriving in Pittsburgh, but certainly the most sinister were produced after taking up residence in the city.[1] *Street Urchins* (Figure 2), which dates from Blythe's first years in Pittsburgh, offers a frightening glimpse into the city's dark spaces. The scene shows a large group of young boys, some playing with firecrackers, others smoking and loitering. The boys' dark, lifeless eyes reveal little expression other than a vicious fascination with their dangerous toy. Their pudgy and round faces make it difficult to determine the boys' age. Their infantile features suggest that they are quite young but their illicit behavior indicates that they are much older. The main action in the painting takes place in the foreground where three boys look on as a fourth boy lights a firecracker. Although the viewer is given a front row seat to this display, the boys gaze intently at the firecracker and do not welcome us into their group. Behind this principal group, several other boys are visible in the shadows. A collection of blurred faces and dirty hands extends from the background, making it hard to determine the exact size of this assembly.

The setting of the scene is just as unsettling as the young boys who inhabit it. The dark confined space is clouded with smoke from the boys' cigars. Blythe focuses tightly on the group in the foreground and leaves few clues as to where the scene takes place. Dorothy Miller suggests that the column to the right of the scene is a lamppost which would place the scene outdoors.[2] The large, round object in the foreground is clearly a barrel, and the object Miller describes is likely the same, standing on end. Additionally,

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[1] An example of an earlier urchin painting is *The Newsboys*, which Chambers dates to ca. 1846-52, 146. Blythe rarely dated his work, but Chambers has grouped the later urchins based on their style and provenance.

[2] Miller, 60.

the darkness and tight confinement of the scene seem to place the activity indoors. The broken paving stones along the floor of the scene could be found both in both the interior of buildings and outside along sidewalks. It is likely that the setting was left intentionally vague to stir fear in the viewer that such a scene could occur anywhere within the city. Cigar butts and spent matches littering the floor show that these boys have occupied this spot for some time. The open powder envelope is a good indication that they are not likely to move along soon. The overall impression rendered by the painting is one of filth. Dirt covers not only covers the boys' faces, hands and clothes but also the inanimate objects which share their space. Their potentially destructive act seems appropriate within such a wretched setting.

In *Street Urchins* Blythe created a very different group scene than his contemporary George Henry Hall. In Hall's painting *Boys Pilfering Molasses* the young boys are united around their mischievous act. The group is brought together through their simple enjoyment of their stolen treat. In Blythe's painting the firecracker seems like an expected element among such a sordid crowd, and it offers little joy for the children. Rather, they proceed in their act out of sheer destructive determination. The potential for groups of young, poor children towards destruction was precisely what most frightened reformers like Charles Loring Brace.[3] Joseph Tuckerman, a Boston Minister, wrote that when poor children were idle and out of school they inevitably congregated with those in a like position. He argued that once a child began a life on the streets, he "almost without

[3] Boyer, 96. Also Brace, 317.

exception will become a vagrant, and probably a thief."[4] While many could sympathize with the plight of a solitary street children who had fallen on hard times, the thought of hordes of listless children terrified many city dwellers. Blythe's painting is an alarming glimpse of the tendency of these groups of children towards crime and destruction. While one could imagine Hall's group of troublemakers disbanding after sampling their treat, Blythe's urchins have occupied their dark hideout for some time. It seems unavoidable that such a group would turn to destruction and crime.

The firecracker in the painting may allude further to the dangerous potential of groups of street children. A firecracker also features prominently in Blythe's painting *The Firecracker* (Figure 15), which is dated to 1856. Here a young boy, holding a tattered and neglected slate and reader, lights a cigarette with a burning firecracker. The foundries of Pittsburgh are visible in the background spewing smoke into the skyline. While smoke was famously an ever-present feature of the Pittsburgh landscape, the city had quite recently felt the destructive effects of fire. A devastating fire tore through the city in April of 1845, destroying one-third of the city and as many as 1,200 buildings, including the supposedly fireproof Bank of Pittsburgh.[5] The fire was popularly attributed to an Irish washerwoman who left her boiling wash water unattended.[6] Six years later the city was again rocked by fires, this time at the hands of arsonists. The rash of fires was commonly held to be the work of marauding young boys.[7] While some of the fires of 1851 may have been the work of vagrants, these fires were much more likely caused by the hundreds of

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[4] Joseph Tuckerman, *On the Elevation of the Poor* (1874, reprint, New York: Arno Press, 1971), 115.
[5] Peter Charles Hoffer, *Seven Fires: The Urban Infernos That Reshaped America* (New York: Public Affairs, 2006), 78-79.
[6] Ibid, 68.
[7] Chambers, *The World of David Gilmour Blythe*, 54.

open flames among the tightly packed, wooden buildings that filled the city. Nevertheless, the sight of a firecracker in the hands of an unkempt and idle youth would certainly have inspired fear in city dwellers uneasy about the thought of fire. Blythe's *Street Urchins* confirmed such fears that the children who gathered in the city's dark spaces really were engaged in sinister pursuits.

For Blythe and the upper- and middle-class viewers of his paintings, the urchins who inhabited his genre scenes were synonymous with the immigrants whose ranks were swelling in America's cities. Europeans began arriving in the United States in unprecedented numbers during the middle decades of the nineteenth century. During the 1840s around 1.4 million European immigrants arrived in the United States. This was more than double the number that had made the journey in the previous two decades combined. In the 1850s immigration nearly doubled again, with 2.7 million Europeans arriving in the United States. More than two-thirds of those who arrived during these two decades came from Ireland and Germany.[8] Catastrophic events such as the Irish famine of the 1840s prompted many to leave their homeland. Immigrants were also swayed by pull factors within the United States such as geographic and economic mobility, abundant land and a growing industrial economy.

Although the United States was becoming a more urban nation in the decades before the Civil War, the native-born population still resided predominantly in rural areas and small towns. In 1850 only nine percent of the native born population lived in cities with more than 10,000 residents. Meanwhile, thirty-six percent of the foreign-born

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[8] David Ward, *Cities and Immigrants* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1971), 53.

population settled in large cities.[9] This settlement pattern created significant, growing immigrant populations in cities in the eastern half of the country. Most Europeans first arrived in the United States through New York City. While some chose to stay there, competition for unskilled jobs was fierce due to the constant influx of new labor. Consequently, many new arrivals sought to travel onward from New York. There were several options available to those seeking passage to the interior of the country and Pittsburgh was a popular destination. In 1845 a traveler could depart New York City for Columbia, Pennsylvania, by train and then make the rest of the journey to Pittsburgh by canal boat. The entire trip cost six dollars and lasted anywhere from six to eight days.[10] The city was ideally situated along the Ohio River, making it convenient for travel throughout the Midwest. Since it was also an industrial center, temporary residents could hope to find work while they saved money for a journey onwards.

Those who did settle in the city took up residence with other immigrants in tightly packed living conditions. In the years before the Civil War industry was not centralized within the city and poor transportation networks meant that workers were forced to live very close to sources of employment.[11] Slums and shantytowns developed next to areas such as dockyards, which employed large numbers of unskilled workers. These neighborhoods were almost exclusively filled with immigrants. By the 1850's these residential patterns were already well established and newly arrived families and workers usually settled in ethnically uniform neighborhoods.

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[9] Joseph P. Ferrie, *Yankeys Now, Immigrants in the Antebellum United States, 1840-1860* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 35.
[10] Ibid, 56.
[11] Ward, 106.

In Pittsburgh and other American cities the influx of immigrants created an underclass of poor laborers and street children. Immigrants usually left their home country in search of a better situation, and while many immigrants found prosperity in the United States, it usually came slowly. Wealth increased with both age and the length of time since arrival in the U.S. Those who settled in the West and in rapidly growing areas were also more likely to accumulate wealth.[12] During the 1840s and 1850s Pittsburgh's economy was shrinking rather than growing.[13] The city was struck by the general depression of 1855, which was exacerbated by the Panic of 1857. Much like the panic twenty years earlier, the Panic of 1857 was blamed on speculation and the irresponsible management of paper currency. Pittsburgh's economic problems, though, were more directly related to the nation's changing transportation infrastructure. The drought of 1854 lowered the water level of the Ohio River, halting shipping from the city. The problem was compounded by the expansion of railroad networks which were phasing out river travel.[14]

As a transportation gateway, Pittsburgh would have attracted a great number of unskilled, foreign-born workers who either settled in the city because of the availability of low-skilled jobs, or were looking to work to support travel further west. Unskilled laborers were hit particularly hard by economic downturns, and in Pittsburgh immigrants

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[12] Ferrie, 128-129.
[13] The oil boom around Titusville in 1859 was an exception to this trend. The discovery of oil led to a great deal of investment and speculation in Pittsburgh's economy, but this activity yielded little real improvement in the city's situation. Pittsburgh would not fully establish itself as an industrial center until the late nineteenth century and the development of steel.
[14] Rina C. Youngner, *Industry in Art, Pittsburgh, 1812-1920* (University of Pittsburgh Press, 2006), 44-45.

comprised more than two-thirds of the wage labor force.[15] Irish workers were overwhelmingly hurt by economic recession as most lacked the capital necessary to move out of the city and into farming. Most Irish workers, especially after 1845, had few trades to offer and only a rudimentary education.[16] Germans often fared somewhat better than the Irish as they were not fleeing catastrophic famine, only economic stagnation. Nevertheless, wage labor was increasingly becoming a way of life for immigrants rather than a step towards economic prosperity. Unskilled workers who remained in one location trying to improve their situation tended to fare the worst of any group.[17] Since work for unskilled laborers was primarily outdoor work, income was often scarce in the winter months. The uncertainty of work for wage laborers meant that many wives and children were forced to work or beg to make ends meet.

The underclass in America's cities was overwhelmingly composed of immigrants, so when Blythe painted street urchins, he was not only portraying poor children but also immigrant children. When viewers looked upon the young boy in *A Match Seller* (Figure 6) they would see a disheveled and alien child. The image of young that Blythe creates in the painting is a haunting one. The level of detail in the boy's tightly painted face suggests Blythe put a great deal of effort into the disturbing expression. The young match seller stares meekly out at the viewer while biting an apple. His eyes are curiously expressive, perhaps revealing suspicion or resentment on the part of the model. His face reveals a deep despair, quite unlike the destructive determination seen on the faces of the

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[15] Ibid.
[16] Roger Daniels, *Coming to America: A History of Immigration and Ehtnicity in American Life* (New York: Harper Collins, 2002), 132.
[17] Ferrie, 154.

children in *Street Urchins*. His jacket has been mended many times over and his hat is slowly unraveling. The unsold matches in his basket tell of the hard times he is facing. In this painting the unsettling aspect is not the dirt and squalor of *Street Urchins* but the extreme want and despair felt by the young match seller.

Blythe's image of the young urban entrepreneur is decidedly less optimistic than the one conceived by Henry Inman in *The Newsboy* (Figure 9). Blythe's painting is not a statement about the strength of American enterprise but rather a chilling appraisal of the immigrant child's place in the city. The newsboy stands bold and resolute on a busy thoroughfare. He is ready to sell his wares and make something of himself. Blythe's match seller conversely is indifferent to both viewer and customer. Blythe places the boy in a dark space away from the bustle of the city. The boy seems to be resigned to his fate rather than working to improve it. In a similar painting, *The Young Musician* (Figure 16), Blythe pictures the same figure idly plucking a Jew's harp. While the painting features the same boy and props, Blythe shifts the emphasis from the slow sale of the matches to the boy's even more desperate attempt to beg while playing his harp. Calling the boy "Musician" in the painting's title is bitingly ironic since he is only playing his music to attract charity. In both paintings Blythe focuses the scene tightly on the boy, leaving out the hopeful images of American enterprise that fill Inman's canvas. The only semblance of American enterprise in Blythe's painting is the match seller himself, and he is hardly an endorsement for the future of American business.

Indeed the match seller in Blythe's painting is not participating in the American dream but struggling simply to survive. The character in the painting is the son of the

lowest class of Pittsburgh's citizenry. He has been left behind by the rush of commerce and seems content to simply chew his meager fare, or play on a musical instrument. Blythe's comment was not on the health of American enterprise but the precarious position that immigrants occupied in the new system. The young boy in *The Match Seller* is a sympathetic figure but does not inspire pity for himself, only concern for the system that left him so destitute.

In *The Oatmeal Eater* (Figure 1) Blythe avoids the symbols of poverty and want that filled the previously discussed urchin paintings. Although the young boy is untidy and oatmeal dribbles down his chest, his clothes do not show the tatters and grime of the boys in other paintings. Blythe also places the child in a somewhat comfortable setting. He sits on a wooden floor amidst a pail, washbasin and other kitchen implements. Moving the child inside reduces the threat posed since he is not roaming the streets and seemingly has a home and family. While he is not necessarily threatening, *The Oatmeal Eater* is certainly disturbing for his lack of cognizance. He is powerless to even feed himself properly. His blank stare reveals no personality or even conscious thought. He is almost as lifeless as the objects that surround him. He is not a character to be pitied but a grotesque being almost less than human.

Blythe does not cast this boy as an immigrant by his membership in the underclass of the city but through more subtle clues about the boy's character. The boy sports the low slung style of cap frequently worn by Irish types in Blythe's paintings such as *The Shoremen* (Figure 5) and *The Land of Liberty* (Figure 17).[18] This type of hat rarely

[18] Chambers, *The World of David Gilmour Blythe* , 66.

appears on other adults in Blythe's paintings but is frequently worn by urchins such as the boy in *The Oatmeal Eater*.[19] The boy's red cheeks, glassy stare and indifference to the oatmeal spilled all over him could allude to the malaise of drunkenness. Irish immigrants were a favorite target for temperance movements. When many Irish immigrants arrived in the U.S. cities social networks tended to center around bars and drinking. The reputation of the Irish as hard drinkers led middle-class citizens in some cities to unquestioningly connect drunkenness with being Irish.[20]

The boy's features in *The Oatmeal Eater* adhere to commonly held physiognomic and phrenological theories about the Irish. Based in large part on the writings of the Swiss scholar Johann Kaspar Lavater, physiognomy sought to create categories through which a person's inner faculties could be easily read through their external appearance. Phrenology, which grew out of physiognomy, had similar aims but used the shape of the head as the primary index of a person's inner composition. The appeal of physiognomy and phrenology in the United States was based on the need to navigate the increasingly complex social structure of the rapidly changing nation. The disciplines were respected within the scientific community of the time and also very popular in common discourse, with perhaps as many as twenty thousand phrenologist practicing in the United States during the nineteenth century.[21] The Irish and other Gaelic people were frequently the subjects of study by British physiognomists. Daniel Mackintosh of the Anthropological Society of London studied the facial features of numerous people from throughout the

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[19] See *The Firecracker* (Figure 15) and the central figure in *Street Urchins* (Figure 2)
[20] Jennifer A. Greenhill, "Playing the Fool: David Claypoole Johnston and the Menial Labor of Caricature," *American Art* 17, No. 3 (Autumn, 2003), 36.
[21] Perry, 119.

British Isles in order to find discrete categories to define the Gaelic type. In a report to the Anthropological Society of his findings he describes the Gaelic face:

> Bulging forward of the lower part of face—most extreme in upper jaw. Chin more or less retreating . . . (in Ireland the chin is often absent). Retreating forehead. Large mouth and thick lips. Great distance between nose and mouth. Nose short, upturned, frequently concave, with yawning nostrils.[22]

The goal of physiognomy, though, was not simply to define such categories but to use them to determine aptitude and predict behavior. The sloping foreheads of Blythe's urchins for instance could be seen as an absence of the capacity for higher thought.

There is no indication that Blythe subscribed to the theories of physiognomy and phrenology, though he certainly would have been exposed to them.[23] It is also certain that he would have been familiar with the simianized caricature of the Irishman in popular imagery. The ape-like Irish character, which was a common stereotype in the nineteenth century, grew out of physiognomic studies like those of Mackintosh. American artists and satirists adopted an image of an apish Irishman with a low sloping forehead, upturned nose and squinted eyes from English cartoonists and caricaturists. In America this image of the Irish appeared in many different forms. Thomas Nast, in cartoons for *Harper's Weekly*, frequently used an ape-like figure to represent Irish immigrants. In his cartoon *The Day We Celebrate St. Patrick's Day, 1867* (Figure 18) numerous figures with simianized faces attack police and other respectable citizens. The boy in *The Oatmeal Eater* shares many of the ape-like qualities of the Irish stereotype popularized by artists

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[22] Daniel Mackintosh, "The Comparative Anthropology of England and Wales," *Anthropological Reviewand Journal* 4, 15-16. Quoted in L. Perry Curtis, Jr. *Apes and Angels, The Irishman in Victorian Caricature* (Washington D.C: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1971), 18.

[23] See Charles Colbert, *A Measure of Perfection, Phrenology and the Fine Arts in America* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1997), for a thorough examination of the influence of Phrenology on nineteenth-century art.

such as Nast. With this exception of a hirsute face, the boy's features are quite siminianized. His upturned nose, wide-set eyes and sloping forehead adhere closely to the popular image of the Irish ape.

The image Blythe created in *The Oatmeal Eater* is of a pathetic immigrant figure, powerless to help himself. Together with his other street urchin scenes, this painting was a strong indictment of the ever-growing immigrant population in America's cities. According to Blythe, the immigrant children who comprised the lowest classes of the city were either ready for destruction, unwilling to work to improve their situation or simply incapable of caring for themselves. The optimism of his contemporaries Inman and Hall is completely absent from Blythe's urchin paintings. In fact the deep cynicism and despair in Blythe's paintings emanates from the urchins themselves. Their dangerous and pathetic personages dramatically convey a sense of worry for their own future as well as that of America.

Blythe was indeed very concerned for the future of his country, and the rising immigrant class was one of his greatest sources of worry. The next chapter will offer an explanation for Blythe's dark vision of America's street children. Blythe believed immigration to be a very real problem for the United States. Examinations of Blythe's own political views and the philosophies of nativist political parties will allow for a better understanding of why Blythe held such a harsh view of immigrant children.

Chapter 3: Street Urchins and American Nativism

The deeply cynical vision of the child that David Gilmour Blythe created in his genre scenes echoed his complex political attitudes towards immigration and its impact on the nation. Even seemingly innocuous genre paintings reflect the political viewpoint of both their creator and his or her environment. A painting like *The Oatmeal Eater* may appear on the surface as a comical portrayal of a simpleton. This thesis, however, has shown that Blythe was not simply painting fanciful children for his viewers' amusement but a specific underclass of city residents. Blythe's conception of this specific group was shaped by his deeply ingrained political and moral values. He increasingly saw immigration as a danger to the traditional values of American republicanism. During the late 1850's, when he was creating his urchin paintings, Blythe subscribed to the nativist stance of the Know Nothing Party. While he did not condemn immigration outright, Blythe objected to the way foreigners were so easily granted access to the political process. This chapter will consider Blythe's political beliefs as the primary motivation for his dark vision of urban childhood. As the Know Nothing Party declined in significance, and Blythe's own views changed, the artist discontinued his urchin paintings. In the 1860's as Blythe shifted his allegiance to the Republican Party, his harsh paintings of street urchins disappeared, and he focused his criticism instead on business and the machines of power.

Blythe's worldview was shaped by his upbringing as well as his early experiences as an artist in Ohio and western Pennsylvania. Blythe was raised to value literacy and learning. Both of Blythe's biographers relate an episode in which the artist's father, John Blythe, turned down an offer of 160 acres of land in exchange for his twenty-three volume set of the *Encyclopedia Perthensis* which he had brought from Scotland.[1] Clearly John Blythe placed a high premium on education. David Gilmour Blythe's earliest letters reflect similar values, as he was already well versed in the work of Robert Burns and other British poets. As the son of a farmer Blythe was also raised to value hard work and the self sufficiency that comes from living off one's own land. While Blythe grew up in agrarian surroundings, he matured within the city. He moved to Pittsburgh at the age of sixteen and by twenty-two was serving in the navy. While he saw no combat, he certainly saw a great deal more of the world than he had been exposed to up to that point. Blythe's service in the navy brought him to Boston and New York, where he could see first-hand the workings of America's big cities.

Previous scholars have emphasized Blythe's Presbyterianism as a source of his strong moral sense. The Blythe family belonged to a branch of the Presbyterian faith known as Seceders, which followed a strict interpretation of Calvinism. While Blythe's writings at times reflect a strong belief in sin and the importance of faith, his mature religious views were far from straightforward. His bride Julia Keffer was a Catholic and the couple was married in Old Saint Paul's Cathedral in Pittsburgh, a Catholic church. Upon her death Julia was reportedly buried in the Catholic cemetery in Brownsville,

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[1] Chambers, *The World of David Gilmour Blythe*, 12; Miller, 1-2.

Pennsylvania. Such rites were not usually granted to those who married outside of the faith, which could indicate that Blythe formally renounced Protestantism.[2]

While Blythe was largely successful in his endeavors, he was never comfortable with the entrepreneurial aspects of the art world. Following the warm reception of his statue of Lafayette, Blythe was offered a commission to create a statue of the revolutionary war hero General Nathaniel Greene to adorn the Greene County Courthouse in Waynesburg, Pennsylvania. Blythe turned down the commission which touched off a war of words in the local press. The local citizens claimed Blythe sought an exorbitant sum for his work, while Blythe accused the town of being tasteless and vulgar. Blythe traded poetic barbs with the townsfolk in the editorial sections of the local newspapers. In his final indictment against the town, Blythe, using the penname Boots, explains his motivation:

> 'Twas not because "Boots" "couldn't come it,"
> But 'twas because he wouldn't done it
> For nothing.[3]

The entire episode certainly angered Blythe and he never again accepted any large-scale public sculpture commissions. Blythe's experience with the *Great Moving Panorama of the Allegheny Mountains* left him even more disillusioned with the commercial side of the arts. The panorama was Blythe's largest effort to market his craft. Blythe invested considerable time and his own money in all aspects of the project, only to have it prove a complete failure. While Blythe had achieved success as an artist before he arrived in

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[2] Chambers, *The World of David Gilmour Blythe* , 25

[3] David Gilmour Blythe, *Boots Vs. Waynesburg* January 1851, printed in Bruce Chambers, *David Gilmour Blythe (1815-1865): An Artist at Urbanization's Edge* (PhD Dissertation, University of Pennsylvania, 1974), 348.

Pittsburgh, he had also experienced many of the pitfalls that accompanied a market-driven art world. According to Bruce Chambers, after the failure of his panorama Blythe no longer shared "the entrepreneurial ethic by which his fellow artists commended themselves to the public," and he increasingly saw himself as a commentator on the events and people of his time.[4]

Although Blythe often expressed despair about the state of politics and the nation, he believed firmly in the United States constitution and the values of the early republic. Blythe wrote, "If Americanism is studied, it is the only pure sistem [sic] of politics."[5] Despite his frequent criticism of government and society, many of Blythe's writings express a deep sense of patriotism. The scenes in Blythe's panorama reflected his deep pride and nostalgia for the earlier foundations of the American nation. The panorama included depictions of Monticello; Fort Necessity; the first president of the Continental Congress, Arthur Sinclair; and other scenes and characters from the early years of the nation's history. Blythe was very traditional in his politics, opposing many Jacksonian measures such as the expansion of the franchise. By the time he settled in Pittsburgh Blythe had developed firm political beliefs based on his upbringing and early career. He valued the earliest forms of American government and believed that the privilege of democracy only belonged to those who similarly valued and understood its importance. Blythe sought a return to the virtues he found in the early republic and strongly opposed any corruption of what he saw as the principal values of Americanism.

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[4] Bruce W. Chambers, "The World of David Gilmour Blythe, 1815-1865," *Carnegie Magazine*, 55 No. 5. (May, 1981), 19.
[5] Blythe, Poetry Scrapbook, printed in Chambers, *An Artist at Urbanization's Edge*, 333.

For Blythe, during the 1850's one of the primary threats to the American democracy and society was immigration. Blythe adopted a strongly nativist political stance and continually denounced foreigners who he felt did not share his vision for the American nation. In the 1856 election Blythe supported the Know Nothing candidate Millard Fillmore and shared the party's anti-immigrant beliefs. Blythe may not have shared the intense fear and hatred of foreigners espoused by some nativists, but he clearly resented the way immigrants disrupted the political process. In 1856 he wrote to his friend Hugh Gorley,

> What kind of political atmosphere
> Have you got out there—the same as here?
> Have all the imported from far and near,
> From Patrick O'Fling to Hans Mine-Heer
> With their pipes and praties and larger beer,
> And their privilege of voting in half a year,
> Have they all got "Buck and Breck" by the ear?[6]

In the letter Blythe objects to what he saw as the undeserved importance placed on newly arrived Irish and German voters. "Buck and Breck" refers to the Democratic Party presidential candidate James Buchanan and his running mate John Breckenridge, who Blythe felt pandered to immigrant voters. Blythe believed that after such a short period in the United States, there was no way that these new voters could fully understand and appreciate American politics.

As the son of immigrants, Blythe respected foreigners who came to the United States ready to knowledgably contribute to the nation's future. His statue of General Lafayette shows a great admiration for the French general and statesman. Blythe based

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[6] Blythe, Letter to Hugh A. Gorley, August 4, 1856, printed in Chambers, *An Artist at Urbanization's Edge,* 326.

the composition on a woodcut made after French artist Ary Scheffer's portrait of Lafayette, which was donated to the United States government on the general's return to the country in 1824. In his painting *The Coal Carrier* (Figure 19) Blythe creates a sympathetic image of a foreign coal worker. The older subject of this painting is shown in three-quarter view against a flat grey background, staring straight out at the viewer. He stands upright and carries his load effortlessly. The *East Liverpool Tribune* posthumously identified the figure in the painting as a well known Frenchman, who despite being well educated, shoveled coal to make money since he could not speak English.[7] Clearly Blythe appreciated those foreigners who respected the ideals of the United States Constitution and worked hard within the existing system to improve themselves. He had no sympathy, however, for those who were easily taken advantage of by deceitful politicians and businessman. Blythe wrote in his scrapbook, "I deem him guilty of constructive manslaughter—who persists in exercising his privilege of franchise without any intelligent knowledge of what he exercises it on."[8]

Blythe's views on immigration were not unique in the national discourse. Nativist movements surfaced in American politics throughout the first half of the nineteenth century. Early movements were religious rather than political in nature and were mostly confined to cities along the eastern seaboard such as New York, Boston and Philadelphia. Catholics bore the brunt of most of the nativist attacks of the first decades of the nineteenth century. Irish immigrants were invariably viewed as Catholics and many xenophobes saw the massive influx of poor Irish as a threat to traditional American

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[7] Yougner, 43.
[8] Blythe, Poetry Scrapbook, in Chambers, *An Artist at Urbanization's Edge*, 333.

society. During a tour of Europe, New York artist Samuel F.B. Morse, an ardent opponent of Catholicism in America, discovered an Austrian group called the Leopoldine Foundation which funded Catholic missions in the United States. In a series of letters to the *New York Observer* Morse accused the Austrian government and the Pope of using Catholic emigration to gain control of the United States government.[9] Morse founded the New York Protestant Association in 1834 to organize opposition to Catholic influence in America. Similar organizations such as the American Protestant Union and the American and Foreign Christian Union were established in the following years to help fight the spread and power of Catholicism in America.

The growing hostile sentiment towards Catholics and foreigners began to gain political momentum in the late 1840s and early 1850s. Nativist political societies formed in secret and were organized to protect members' interests from immigrants. The Order of United Americans formed in 1845 in New York City and grew to be the largest of these secret organizations. The group refused to involve itself in politics, which prompted the founding of the Order of the Star Spangled Banner in 1850 in order to provide a political vehicle for the nativist agenda.[10]

The collapse of the Whig party following the Kansas-Nebraska Act in 1854 provided an opportunity for a large-scale nativist political movement to establish itself. The act split Kansas and Nebraska into two territories and allowed each to decide for itself whether to allow slavery. For the most part northern Whigs opposed the act while southern Whigs supported it. When the measure passed the party became irreparably

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[9] Thomas J. Curran, *Xenophobia and Immigration, 1820-1930* (Boston: G.K. Hall and Co., 1975), 26.
[10] Ibid,50.

fractured and effectively powerless. Some Whigs left to join the Republican Party, but many others turned their support to the growing Know Nothing Party.

Fueled by the absence of political power created by the breakup of the Whigs, the Know Nothings became the fastest growing political party from 1853 to 1856.[11] The basic goal of the party was to limit the influence of immigrants on politics and in the labor force. The party platform called for the extension of the naturalization period from five to twenty-one years. The Know Nothing party also viewed itself as a party of the common people, allowing direct selection of candidates. The party's membership was drawn primarily from the artisan and middle classes, and its leaders tended to be much younger than in the other parties.[12] Unlike earlier nativist movements, the Know Nothing Party was national in scope and made real political gains. In the 1855 election the party dominated the state elections in both New York and Massachusetts. In that same year ninety members of the U.S. House of Representatives belonged to the Know Nothing Party.[13] The party was particularly popular in Pittsburgh where the vehement opponent of immigration Joe Barker managed to be elected mayor despite being in jail for assault and battery.[14]

The Know Nothing Party's quick ascension was undone by the 1856 national election. The party was divided over the decision to allow slavery in the new territories and ultimately could not overcome the issue. In the 1856 election the party nominated Millard Fillmore who ran against the Democrat James Buchanan and the Republican

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[11] Michael F. Holt, *Political Parties and American Political Development from the Age of Jackson to the Age of Lincoln* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1992), 267.
[12] Ibid, 277.
[13] Curran, 64-65.
[14] Chambers, *The World of David Gilmour Blythe* , 47.

candidate John Fremont. Southern Know Nothings feared that a vote for Fillmore would instead elect Fremont who was a free soiler and opposed the expansion of slavery into the territories. The issue divided the Know Nothing Party and Buchanan was elected without a majority of the vote. After the election the Know Nothing Party declined dramatically and was no longer a significant presence in national politics.

In light of the rise of nativist parties and Blythe's own beliefs, Blythe's street urchin paintings become more understandable as anti-immigrant political statements. In *Street Urchins* Blythe populates the scene with an indiscernible number of young immigrant children. The ambiguous arms and faces appearing out of the darkness hints at a much larger group of urchins in the background. Just as the number of foreigners migrating to the United States was growing unchecked, one has the impression that this group of children will swell to dangerous numbers. The alarm at the vice and destruction in the painting is secondary to the sense of foreboding caused by the looming size of the ill-defined mass of urchins. In the painting Blythe plays up the danger posed by the foreign-born poor when they coalesce into a group. Nativists feared the power of such groups to sway elections and change the labor market.

Blythe's *Match Seller* expresses disdain for those immigrants who were unwilling or unable to contribute to the American marketplace. The helpless young boy resigns himself to his position, unable to even work at his meager task of selling matches. The figure differs profoundly from the proud French worker in *The Coal Carrier*. The older man works hard at an honest trade, despite the fact that his education should preclude such work. In contrast, the match seller represents the unskilled and uneducated worker

who, in the eyes of nativists, offered nothing to society. *The Oatmeal Eater* continues the theme of the hopeless immigrant. Just as the boy in the painting is unable to provide for his most basic needs, according to Blythe, the foreigners arriving in the United States were powerless to fend for themselves. If the immigrant was incapable of caring for himself, then in the minds of the Know Nothings there was nothing to keep opportunistic politicians from taking advantage of his vote. Certainly Blythe could not have conceived ofthe bumbling idiot in *The Oatmeal Eater* as becoming a person capable of the complex thought which Blythe felt the privilege of the franchise required.

After the collapse of the Know Nothing Party following the 1856 election, Blythe, like many other party members, shifted his allegiance to the Republican Party. Blythe found much to admire in Republican presidential candidate Abraham Lincoln, whom he felt shared his own belief in the true spirit of American democracy. Prior to the onset of the Civil War Blythe criticized extremists on both sides of the slavery issue. Blythe opposed abolition out of fear that black workers would migrate to the north but also felt that the expansion of slavery into the territories was an affront to free labor, which he valued highly. All of these concerns, though, were secondary to preserving the constitution and maintaining the union.[15] Blythe's realignment to the Republican party occurred during the same period he concluded his series of street urchin paintings. By 1860 Blythe was completely devoted to Lincoln and the Republican cause and would not paint another urchin scene. Instead he focused his social critique on the volatile political climate which threatened to tear the country apart. For Blythe the most potent threat to

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[15] Chambers, *The World of David Gilmour Blythe* , 78.

the Americanism he valued so highly had changed and his artistic priorities shifted accordingly.

It is important to consider that Blythe used children rather than adults to illustrate his condemnation of the immigrant class. Unfavorable images of adult foreigners appear in Blythe's paintings such as *The Shoremen* and *Land of Liberty* but not on a scale anywhere approaching his street urchin scenes. Throughout the rest of his career as a social satirist, Blythe included children in his genre scenes but no longer as the principal subject of his painting. Blythe chose foreign children specifically at this period in his career to express his political beliefs, because he was able to build upon the significance that images of children already carried. Blythe would have been familiar with the romantic view of childhood that permeated nineteenth-century society and also would have assumed a similar understanding on the part of his viewers. While Blythe's urchin paintings are devoid of any romanticism, the traditional image of the child was not easily overcome.

As this thesis has shown, the romantic notion of the innocent child was pervasive in nineteenth-century American society. The idea that children were essentially good, which came from Rousseau and other enlightenment thinkers, dictated not only the prevailing ideas about childhood and education but also the way children were perceived in art. The romantic child, which first appeared in the work of Sir Joshua Reynolds and the English fancy picture, was already an established feature of American genre painting by the 1850s. As an artist working during this period, Blythe would have been familiar with this dominant image of children in art. Blythe, who was an accomplished student of

art, traveled extensively throughout his career and would have been exposed to many examples of the traditional image of the romantic child. In addition, many popular English fancy pictures, as well as genre scenes by Blythe's American contemporaries were readily available throughout the country as graphic reproductions.

The romantic image of the child, though, was not only confined to the fine arts in America. Images of cherubic children appeared in advertisements, commercial prints and ephemera. The New York publishing firm Currier and Ives mass-produced many sentimental prints which portrayed young children with round features and large eyes, either engaged in mischief or gazing innocently out at the viewer. In Louis Maurer's lithograph *Into Mischief* (Figure 21, 1857) published by the Currier and Ives Company, a young girl smiles gleefully as she destructively pours household ingredients into a top hat. While the girl is clearly up to no good, her sweet expression and proper clothing and grooming combine to create a highly sentimental image. Other Currier and Ives prints, such as *Little Sister* (Figure 22, undated), avoided mischief altogether. This print shows a bust-length image of a girl with soft, angelic features, large eyes and exposed shoulders. Her innocent appearance is enhanced by the cross which hangs from her neck. Such romantic images of children were ubiquitous in American popular imagery and Blythe would have certainly been aware of his audience's familiarity with them.

When Blythe created his pessimistic vision of Pittsburgh's street children, he was not creating a completely new image of childhood but playing off the traditional view of the child, which appeared in fine art and dominated the way children were portrayed in American visual culture. Blythe chose children, rather than adults, to portray immigrants

in his genre scenes precisely because of the specific way the child was viewed as a subject in art. The notion that children were essentially good and could be redeemed was ever-present in nineteenth-century society. While education and reform movements may have differed widely in their approaches, all were predicated on the notion that children could be reformed. Blythe's grotesque urchins certainly would have startled and frightened his viewers, but it is unlikely that they would have completely overcome the innocent notion of childhood that was deeply ingrained in the way nineteenth-century Americans viewed young people. By combining the shocking and unsympathetic view of the poor with the subject of the child, Blythe creates in his urchin paintings a critique of immigration and the problems it posed for American society, without demonizing the immigrants themselves. While caricaturists like Thomas Nast portrayed immigrants as violent apes, Blythe avoids such a harsh indictment by picturing his immigrants as children. To the contemporary viewer of Blythe's paintings, a child, no matter how hideous, was someone who could possibly be redeemed. Such an interpretation fits well with Blythe's political views, as he leveled his most critical written attacks against those who would take advantage of foreigners rather than the immigrants themselves.

While Blythe no longer painted street urchins after 1860, the intense social critique of his later paintings shares much with the earlier work. Blythe continued to criticize corruption and those within government and society who upset the natural order for their own gain. Blythe's 1862 painting *Prospecting* (Figure 20) continues the biting social criticism of his urchin paintings. While the subject of the paintings varies greatly, the style and focus of Blythe's critique remain the same. In *Prospecting* Blythe aims his

ire at the oil boom which had recently swept Pittsburgh. In 1859 oil was discovered in Titusville, Pennsylvania, and within a year thirty-five refineries were operating in Pittsburgh.[16] The discovery of oil transformed the countryside, making millionaires out of lucky landholders and wildly inflating land values. Farms were razed in the hopes of discovering "black gold." Boom towns sprung up alongside promising oil fields and sometimes were abandoned just as quickly as they appeared. In Pittsburgh speculation began almost immediately with countless entrepreneurs clamoring to get a piece of the take. Blythe's painting is set in an imagined wasteland of the Pennsylvania oil fields. A solitary figure stands among bones and abandoned farm implements. The middle ground is filled with the derricks and sheds of the oil industry. A sign at the figure's feet attests to the preposterous prices that former farmland now fetched. The figure in the painting, who Bruce Chambers identifies as Blythe himself, studies the signs offering him options to make his fortune.[17] Under his arm he carries a bundle of greenbacks, a paper currency which the U.S. government circulated without the backing of gold. The greenbacks quickly lost value and contributed to out-of-control inflation during the war years.

Blythe's criticism in *Prospecting* is multi-layered and complex but follows a central theme. He felt that the events surrounding the oil rush destroyed the old order on which American society was founded. The value of the land was no longer to be found in working it honestly but in speculative gambling on what lay beneath. Even the very medium of exchange, the greenback, seemed to have an arbitrary value determined by distorted market forces. Blythe's painting is not a condemnation of the oil boom or even

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[16] Youngner, 46.
[17] Chambers, *The World of David Gilmour Blythe* , 76.

industry but the way that the economy's traditional forms have been perverted into something unnatural.[18] The essence of this critique is not far from that found in his street urchin paintings. While Blythe creates a bleak image of the children themselves, his criticism is not chiefly aimed at the immigrants they represent but the forces in society who would take advantage of them. Blythe felt the power granted to those newly arrived in the country created the same perversion of the natural that occurred during the oil boom. Enterprising businessmen took advantage of foreigners' poverty to depress wages and distort the natural order of the economy. Politicians who used the uninformed votes of immigrants to seize power disregarded the American system of government that Blythe valued above all. While Blythe certainly never found immigrants blameless for the problems facing the nation, he most objected to the way those in power disregarded the traditional order for their own gain.

[18] Wolf, 335.

Conclusion

On May 15, 1865, David Gilmour Blythe died from an alcoholic coma resulting from a drinking binge, which was brought on by his despair over Abraham Lincoln's assassination.[1] Clearly Blythe was someone who took both politics and the health of his country very seriously. Throughout his career, Blythe's painting consistently reflected his political outlook. His urchin paintings, which are both grotesque and puzzling when viewed alongside similar subjects by his contemporaries, were a manifestation of his intense frustration with the negative impact of immigration on the American ideals he cherished. As his political motivations changed, so, too, did his painting. Yet Blythe never abandoned the critical edge that defined his work.

Blythe's paintings found an eager audience among Pittsburgh's growing industrial elite. Blythe was represented by the notable art dealer J.J. Gillespie, who displayed Blythe's work in his downtown Pittsburgh gallery alongside prints imported from Europe. Purchasers of Blythe's urchin scenes included Andrew Carnegie's close friend James Park Jr. and the Pittsburgh publisher Henry Miner. Whether the wealthy purchasers of Blythe's urchin scenes shared his political views is uncertain, but his pessimistic vision of children would have resonated with the upper classes of the city.

[1] Chambers, *Carnegie Magazine*, 25.

Clearly there was a desire for an alternative vision of the urban child other than that offered by artists like Henry Inman and George Henry Hall.

Street urchins and beggar boys continued to be popular subjects in American art. Painter John George Brown became famous for his sentimental portrayals of New York's street children. In the 1890's Jacob Riis created stirring photographs of the young poor to highlight the appalling conditions of New York's tenements. Nativist movements also continued to arise in American politics throughout the rest of the century. The arrival of millions of Chinese workers in the American west prompted congress to pass the Chinese Exclusion Act in 1882 halving the number of Chinese immigrants to the country. After the Civil War, increased immigration from southern and eastern Europe led to bouts of anti-Semitism in cities along the east coast of the United States. While similar themes continued to appear in both art and politics, no other artist approached the clever combination of the two that Blythe achieved in his urchin paintings. The lasting image of the street urchin in American painting is a sentimental one and Blythe's scenes remain an anomaly.

As political statements, though, Blythe's paintings are subtle and arresting. Their message is appropriately complex when viewed in light of the volatile political climate of the time. Scholars have often recognized Blythe's later work for its satiric merit, while his urchin paintings have been seen as strange aberrations or the musings of a bitter artist. It is clear, however, that Blythe's urchin paintings also reflect his political outlook with the same sophistication as his later work. Blythe continually used his art to critique

threats to American republicanism and his urchin paintings must certainly be viewed as his first major effort in this regard.

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Illustrations

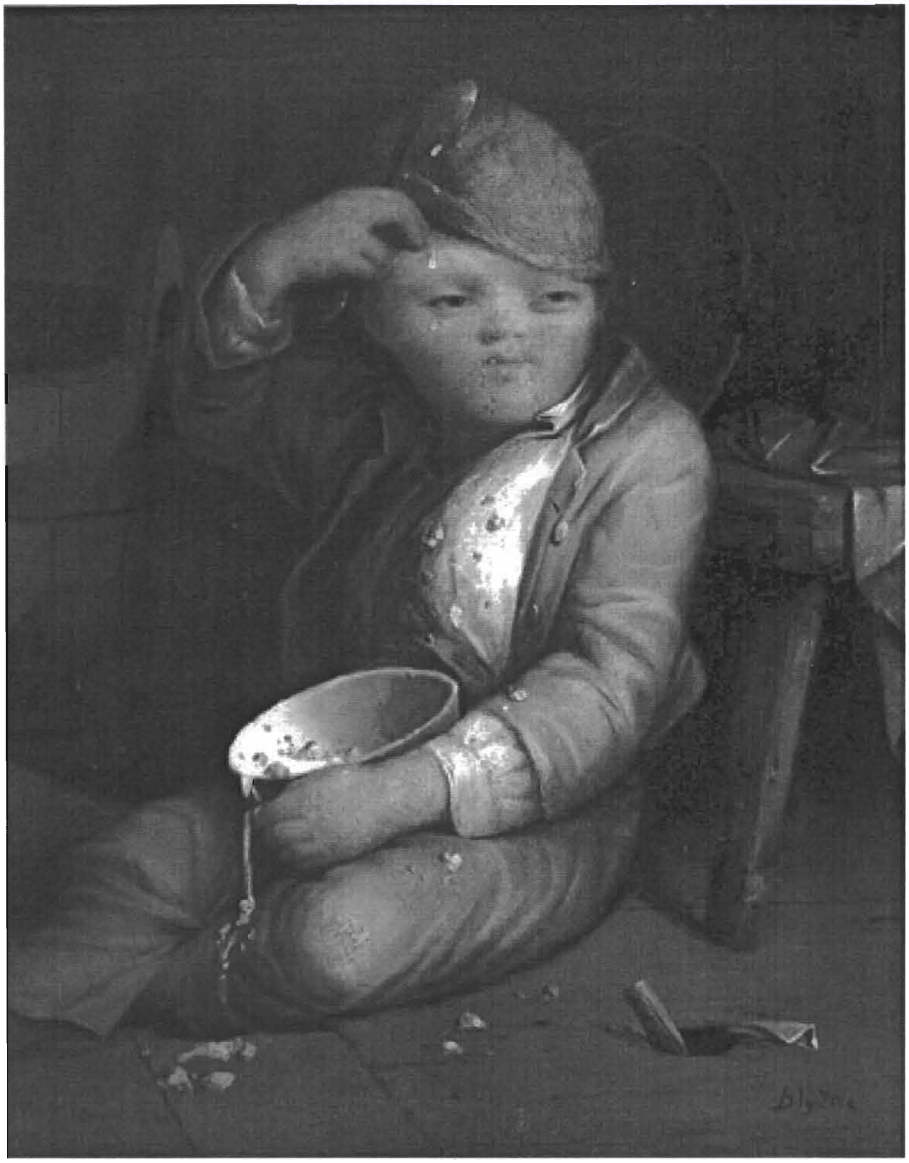

Figure 1: David Gilmour Blythe, *The Oatmeal Eater*, 1856-58

Figure 2: David Gilmour Blythe, *Street Urchins*, 1856-58

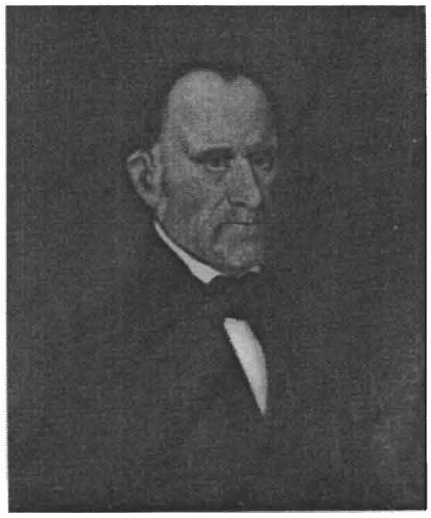

Figure 3: David Gilmour Blythe, *John Blythe*, 1841

Figure 4: David Gilmour Blythe, *General Lafayette*, 1847-48

Figure 5:David Gilmour Blythe, *The Shoremen*, 1852-56

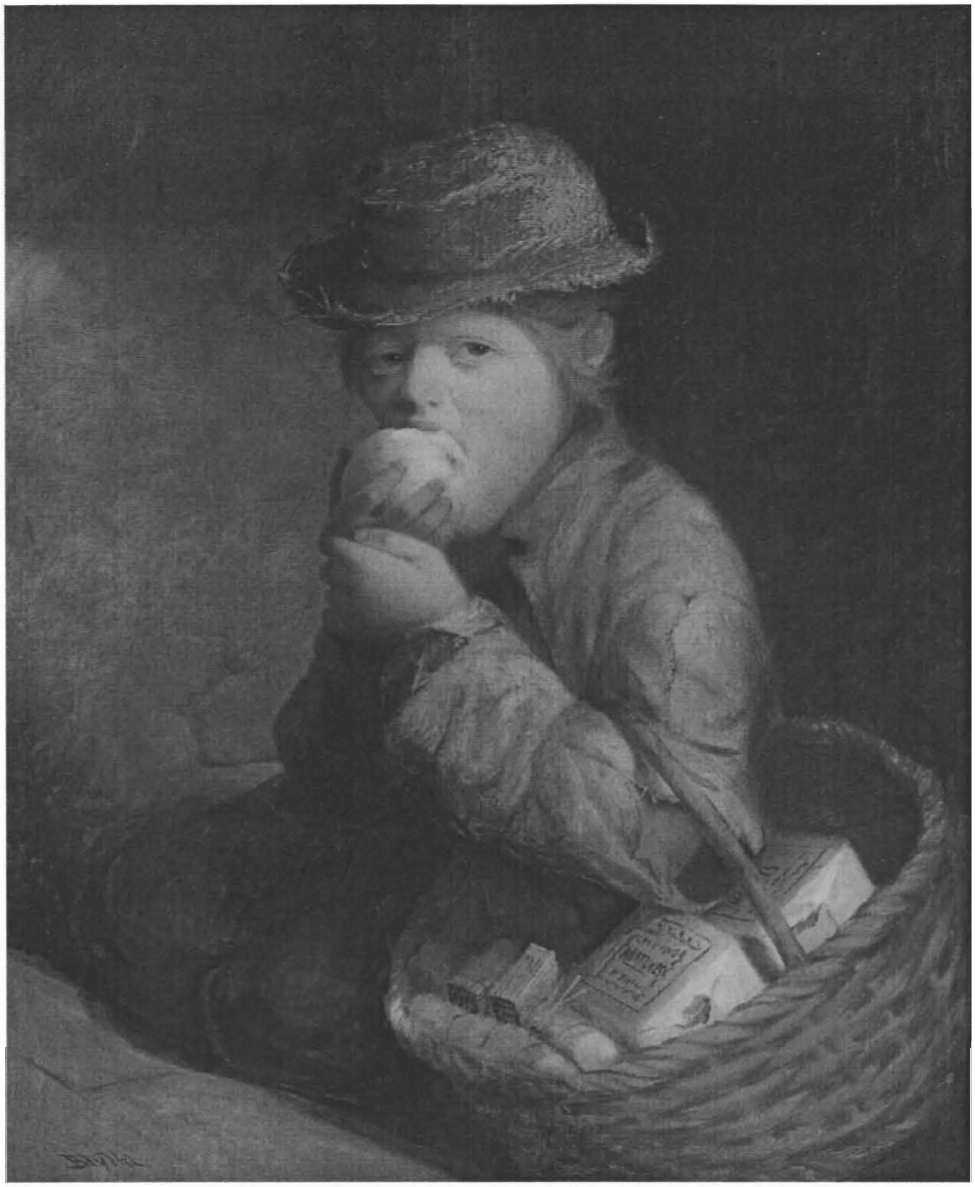

Figure 6: David Gilmour Blythe, *A Match Seller*, ca. 1859

Figure 7: John Russell, *Love Songs and Matches*, 1793

Figure 8: Sir Joshua Reynolds, *The Age of Innocence*, ca. 1788

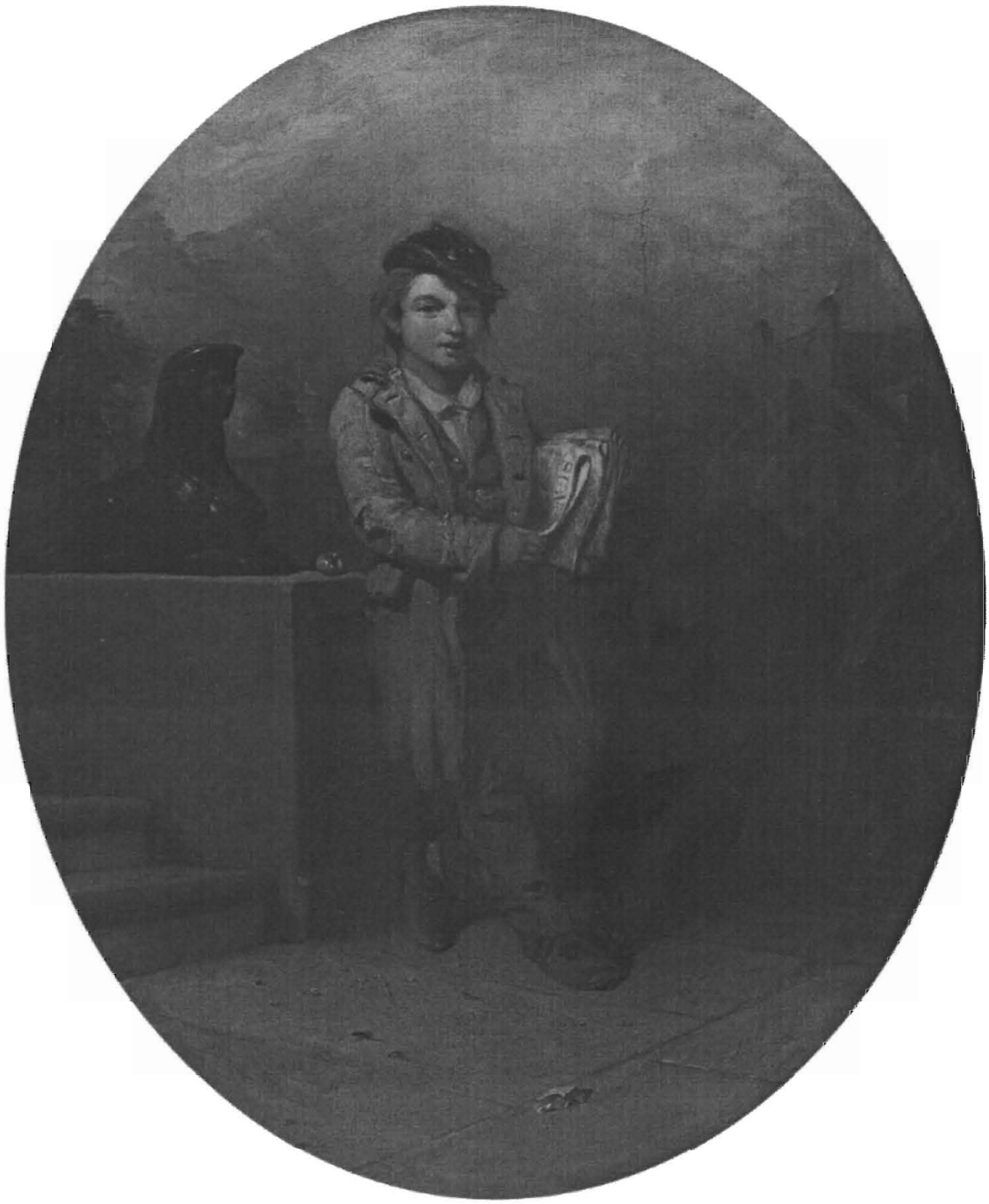

Figure 9: Henry Inman, *The Newsboy*, 1841

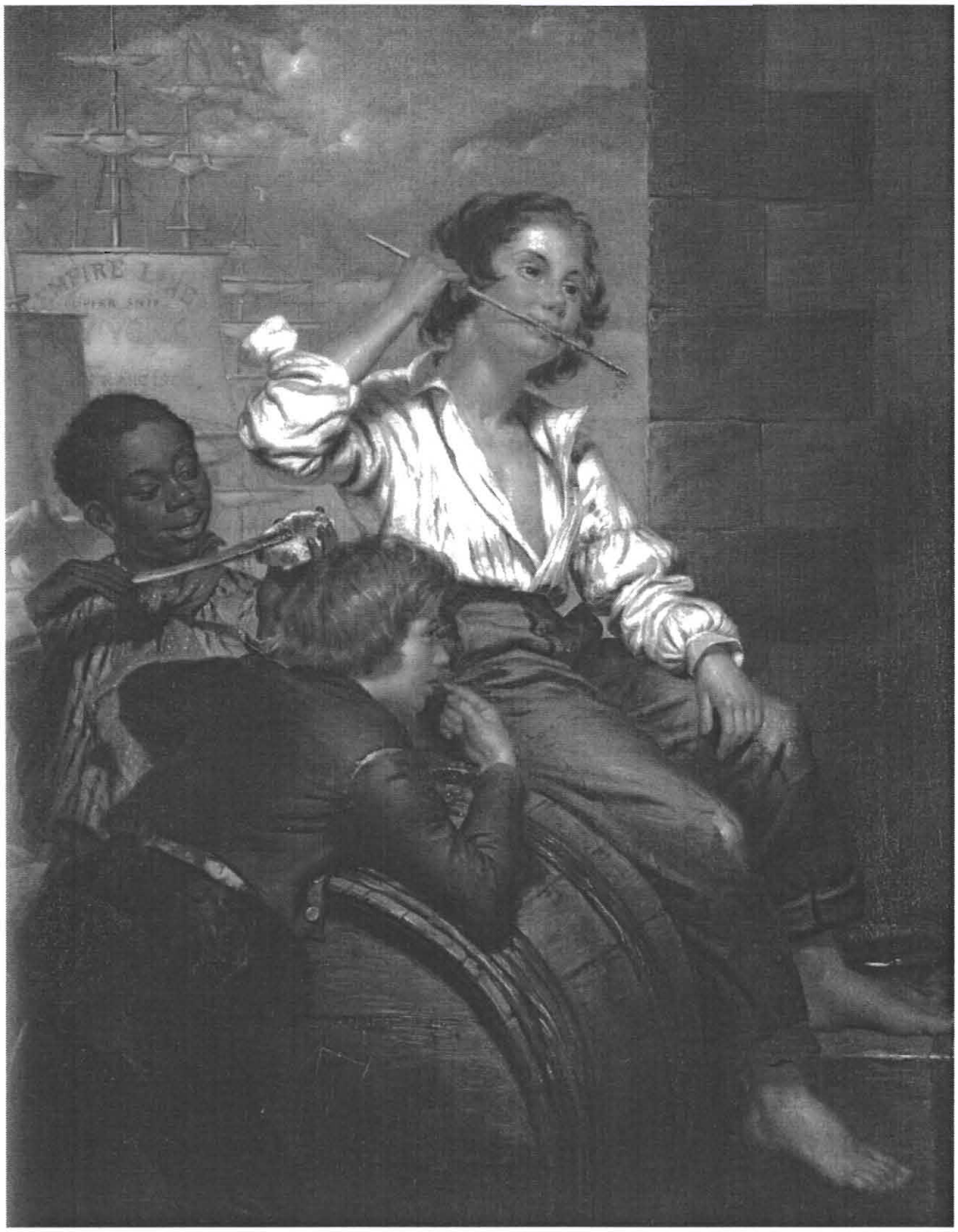

Figure 10: George Henry Hall, *Boys Pilfering Molasses*, 1853

Figure 11: Eastman Johnson, *The Barefoot Boy*, 1860

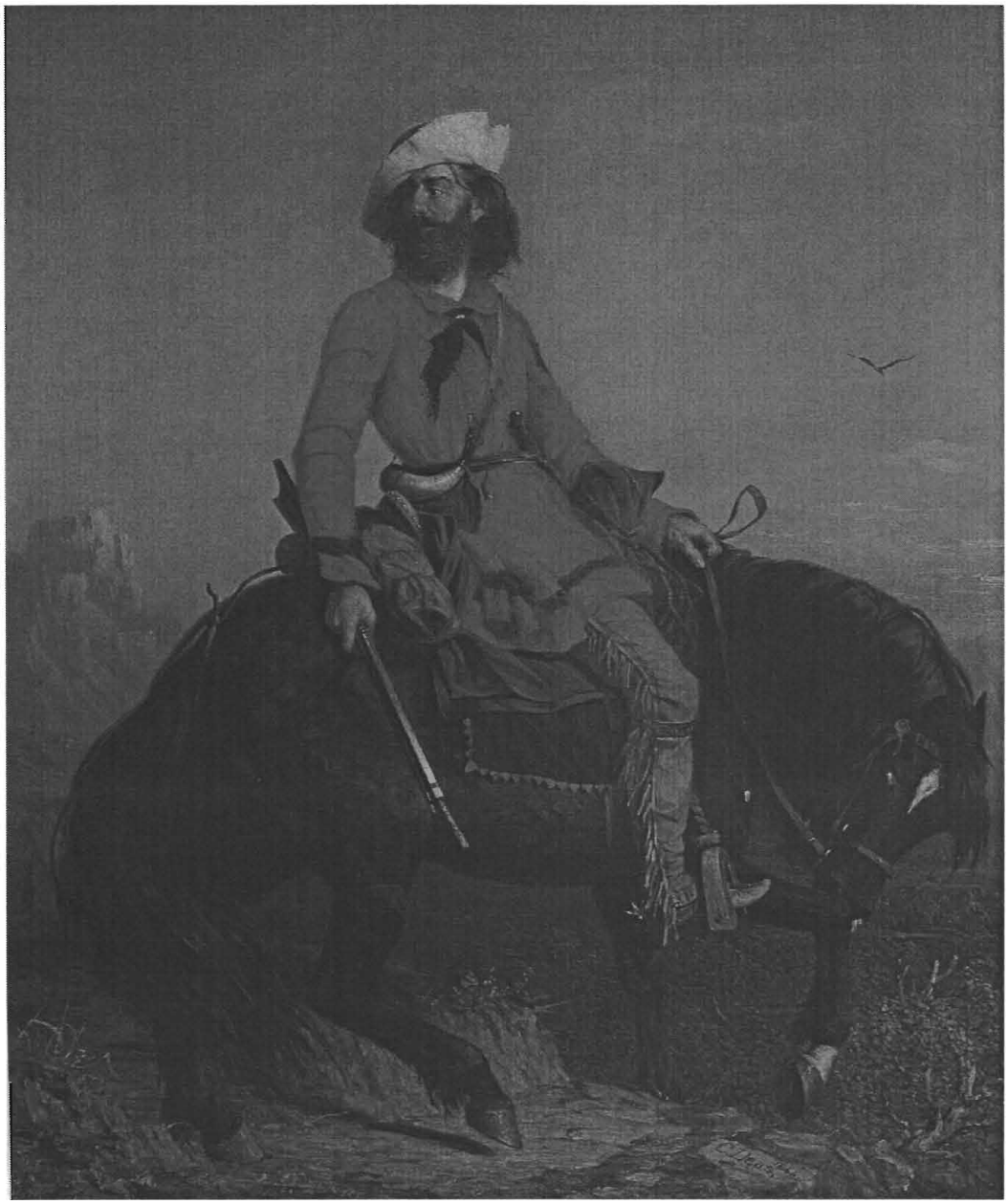

Figure 12: Charles Deas, *Long Jakes*, 1844

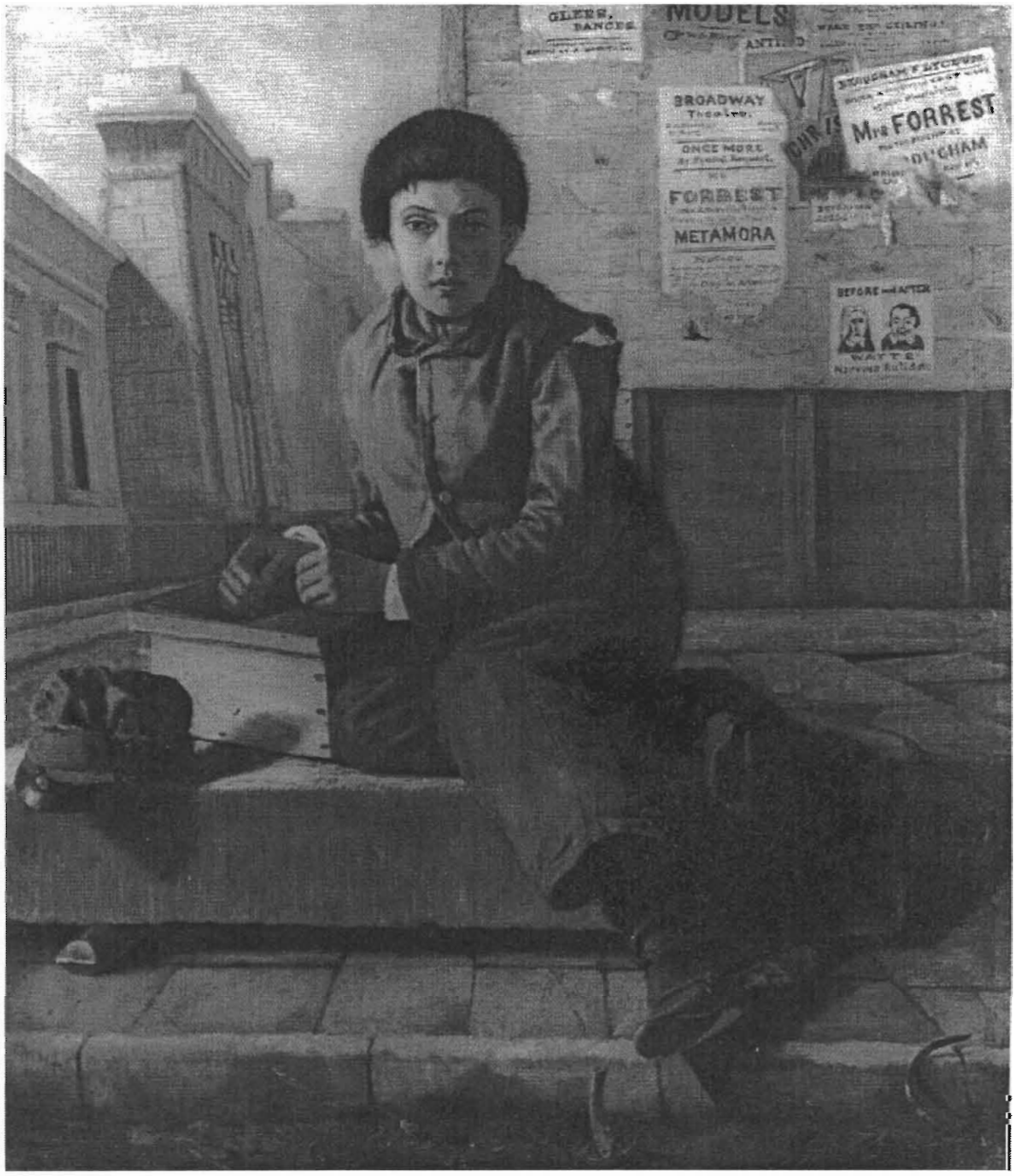

Figure 13: George Henry Yewell, *The Bootblack (Doing Nothing)*, 1852

Figure 14: David Gilmour Blythe, *Young Girl With Pink Rose*, 1850-54

Figure 15: David Gilmour Blythe, *The Firecracker*, 1856

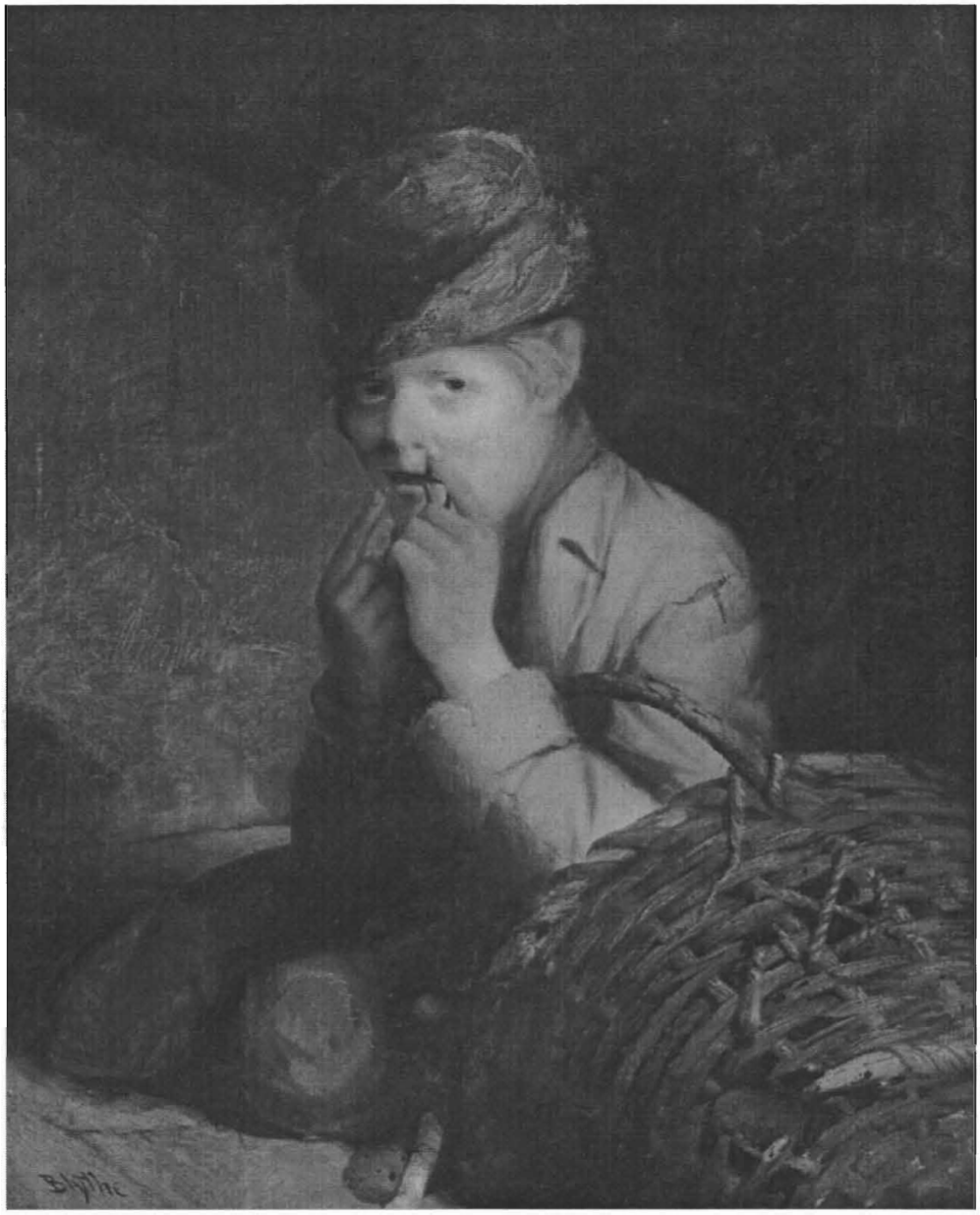

Figure 16: David Gilmour Blythe, *The Young Musician*, 1858-60

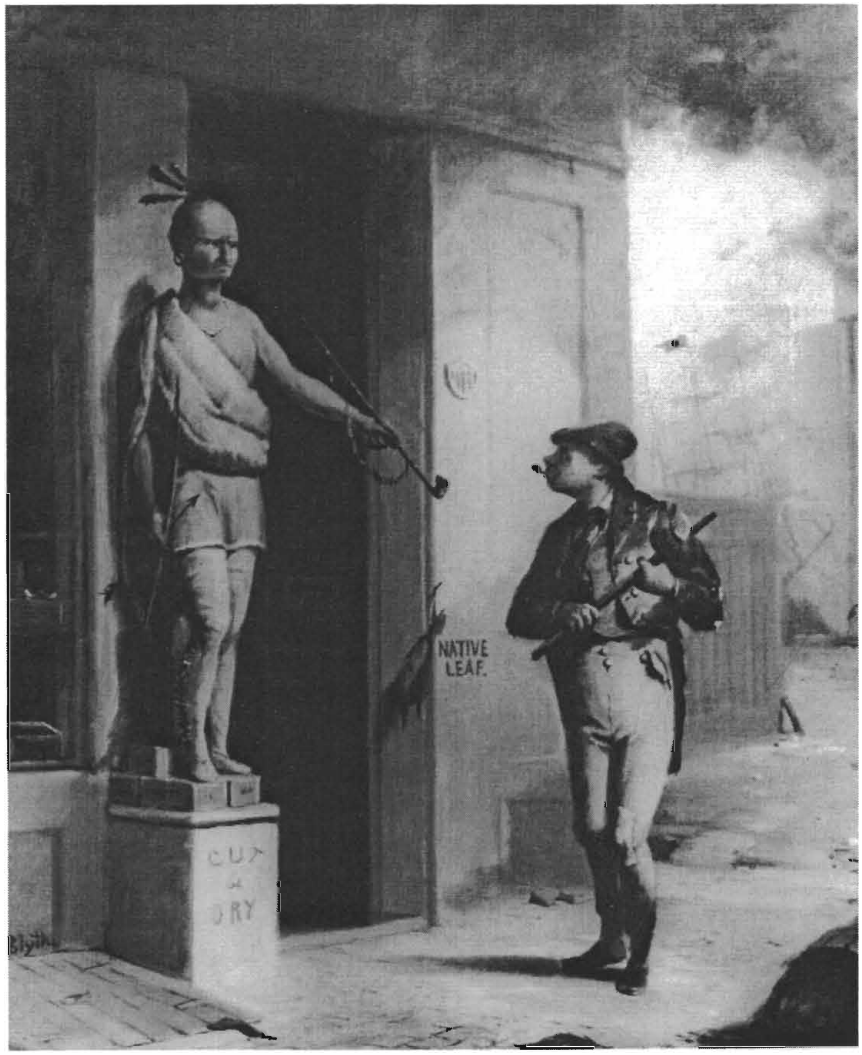

Figure 17: David Gilmour Blythe, *The Land of Liberty*, 1858-60

Figure 18: Thomas Nast, *The Day We Celebrate St. Patrick's Day, 1867*

Figure 19: David Gilmour Blythe, *The Coal Carrier*, 1854

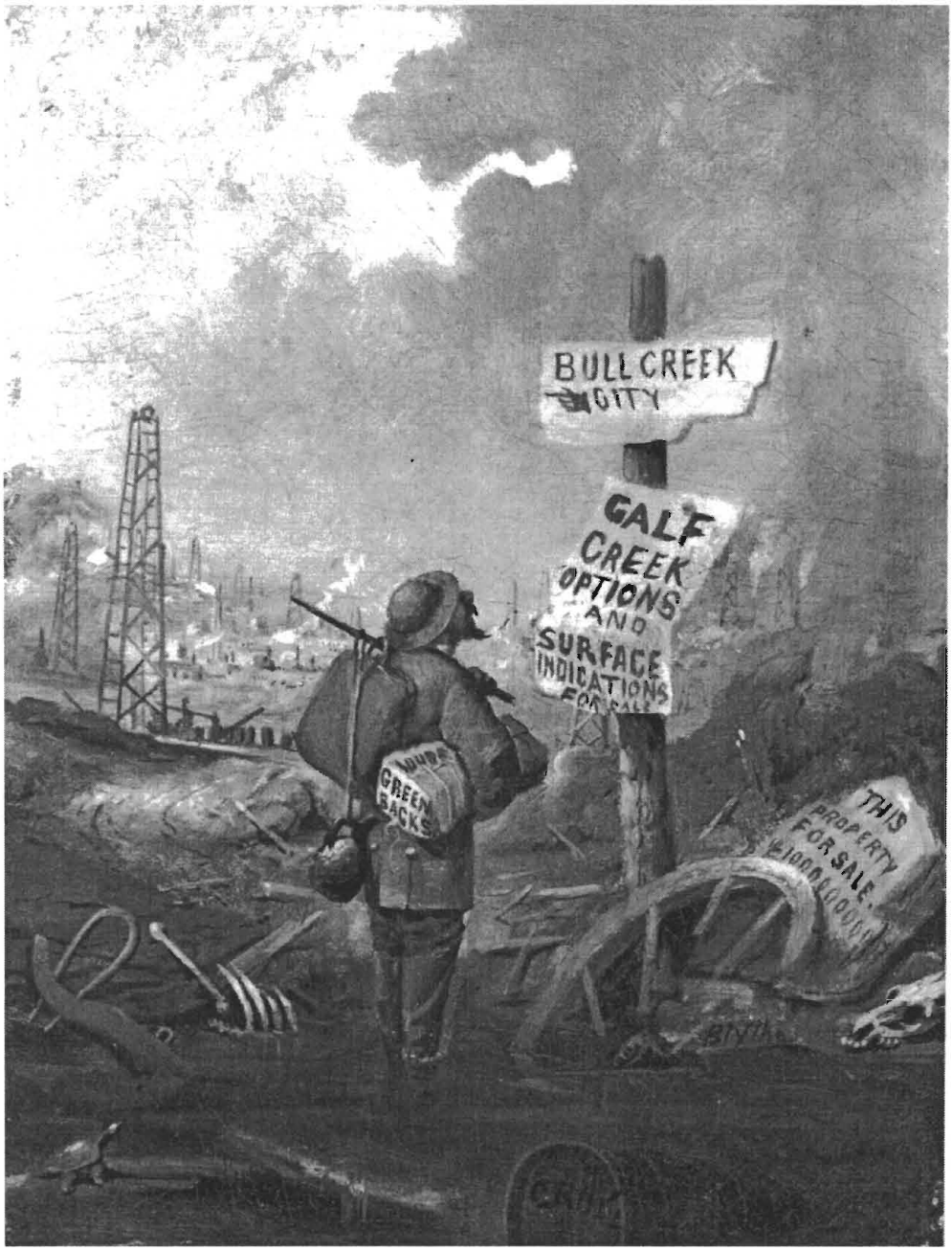

Figure 20: David Gilmour Blythe, *Prospecting*, 1861-63

Figure 21: Louis Maurer, *Into Mischief*, 1857

Figure 22: Currier & Ives, *Little Sister*, undated.

Vita

Corey Scott Piper was born on May 15, 1982 in Richmond, Virginia, and is an American citizen. He graduated from the Governor's School for Government and International Studies, Richmond, Virginia in 1996. He received his Bachelor of Arts in Art History from the University of South Carolina, Columbia in 2000.